Tokyo Ravens Volume 08

Source: https://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?title=Tokyo_Ravens:Volume8

over-cry
東京エイヴンズ
あざの耕平
Kouhei Azano
8
ファンタジア文庫

over-cry
東京レイヴンズ
8
「夜叉丸、蜘蛛丸。姫との契約は成立したようだな」

「……良かったよ」
「え？」
「花火。やっぱり、来て良かった」
「……はい。そうですね」
光のシャワーが夏目を彩る
その瞬間の夏目ほど、
誰かを見て「綺麗」だと思ったのは――

神話にある、八咫烏
陰陽道における、太陽の象徴
伝説の陰陽師の翼
レイヴン

Chapter 1 - Entanglement

"Do you know what the essence of sorcery is?"

"The answer is 'lies'."

"Therefore, the 'truth' must be handled with care."

"More carefully than anyone thinks."

-Tsuchimikado Yakou.

Part 1

Her father was strict.

Even if she searched her memories, she could barely find her father's smile. In the first place, he was taciturn and wasn't one to show his emotions, only occasionally showing the very minimum. But to the young Natsume, the existence she called her 'father' had always been like that. He was her 'family'.

The pair's lives were painted with silence.

But practicing magic made up for this loneliness.

Other Onmyouji would undoubtedly widen their eyes in surprise if they saw. Her father never once paid heed to the girl's age, and Natsume encountered setbacks several times and hung her head in depression, but still immersed herself in magic. There was no way she could break away from it.

She calmly faced magic every day in silence.

The one who could break that silence with a cheerful mood was always that boy. Her childhood friend.

"Let's play! Natsume--!"

◎

"Natsume."

It seemed that she hadn't even noticed the door to the roof being opened.

After Harutora spoke, Natsume shrank back in surprise, then exhaled and smiled gently.

"Harutora-kun."

"How rare for you to come here. .....Come to think about it, you gave the work to Touji."

Harutora smiled, approaching Natsume's side.

The roof of the Onmyou Academy male dorm. The sun had set and the lights from the street hazily illuminated the night sky.

The steamy summer night was very unpleasant compared to the air-conditioned indoors. But the refreshing breeze that occasionally blew lightly stroked the surface of their skin. Harutora stood next to Natsume, closing his eyes with a pleasant mood.

".....It's finally starting tomorrow."

"Yeah."

"Nervous?"

"Well... Yes."

"Yeah, I guess."

Harutora echoed in a relaxed tone.

He stood next to her, looking at the nighttime Shibuya over the guardrails. It just happened to be in the direction of the Onmyou Academy building. Though it hadn't actually been that long of a time, for some reason, he felt like it had already been a long time since he had gone there for classes.

Harutora and Natsume missed their nest.

"But,"

Natsume murmured hesitatingly, lowering her eyes slightly.

"I'm more worried about Kurahashi-san after all....."

His childhood friend's voice was calm and composed. But at the same time, it was as if fresh, still-dripping blood were mixed into it. Harutora said "......Yeah" with a worried look and said no more.

It had been ten days since that incident.

But Kyouko's word at the end still deeply pricked the hearts of the two of them.

Liar.

"......Well, all we can do is resolve ourselves."

"Resolve, huh?"

"Yeah. After all, there's nothing we can deny now. We should talk to her face-to-face..... and then all we can do is apologize until she's willing to forgive us."

Harutora's tone was very serious. Then, he looked at Natsume, a faint smile showing on his face. Natsume could also see that it was just a forced smile, and intentionally smiled back.

"Natsume, you've always been worried about not explaining..... about deceiving, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then, this could be an opportunity instead. You can finally stop hiding. This is a good opportunity to become true friends."

"Maybe."

As she replied, Natsume laughed naturally this time and her shoulders swayed.

"Harutora-kun, you're always so positive."

"That's the only thing good about me."

"Is that so?"

"Ah, you should deny that, even just out of politeness."

Natsume giggled quietly again upon seeing Harutora's face go bitter. Then, she faced Harutora again, slightly tilting her head.

"I feel a bit better, thanks to you. Thank you, Harutora-kun."

Her black hair drooped down smoothly, the ends lightly spreading with the night breeze.

It was embarrassing to be thanked so sincerely. Harutora quietly replied "Oh", inadvertently shifting his gaze.

Just then,

"Harutora-kun?"

Natsume, a bit astonished, seemed to suddenly realize something. "Eh?" Just as Harutora asked back:

"H-Harutora-sama, I'm very sorry....."

The air around his legs swirled into an eddy and the figure of a girl wearing a suikan and hakama appeared.

Ears sprouted from her doll-like head and she had a big tail covered with lustrous hair. This was Harutora's defensive shikigami, Kon.

Harutora looked at his suddenly-materialized shikigami in surprise. More importantly, Kon was a bit flushed and her body's aura was inflated as if she were on alert. Harutora's whole body unconsciously tensed up.

But,

"Kon? What happened?"

"A-Ah, no. Th-There isn't any urgent situation....."

Kon's ears and tail started fidgeting as she looked up at her master. She fumbled for words, seeming to have something that was difficult to say. Though she was struggling to control it, the aura leaking from her already seemed to be going on the attack.

So, Natsume interrupted in place of the tongue-tied shikigami.

"Harutora-kun. Your magical energy is too strong. Also, why did you give that much magical energy to Kon?"

"Eh? Ah--"

Harutora, being questioned, finally realized that he had been constantly infusing magical energy into his shikigami. Moreover, it was definitely an abnormal amount - not long ago, it would have been almost his full magical energy.

"Uwah!"

In a panic, he controlled his magical energy and the flow of magical energy abruptly stopped. Kon heaved a sigh of relief, her tail drooping gently.

"Sorry, Kon. Was that going on the whole time since before?"

"Y-Yes....."

Kon nodded deeply and apologetically.

'Before' meant the time when he had searched for Natsume before coming to the roof. He had summoned Kon in order to have her help him, and at the time he had inadvertently flowed magical energy into her - and that hadn't stopped.

Because Kon was a defensive shikigami, even if she wasn't materialized, she would be linked with her master Harutora's spiritual power all the time. In that sense, Harutora was often sharing his magical energy with Kon. That was also the reason Natsume didn't immediately notice the abnormality.

But,

"Wh-What the master shares is the shikigami's joy..... I'm very happy, but I wasted it....."

"Well, Kon can't calm down while continuously receiving such strong magical energy. Harutora-kun, did you not notice?"

"Sorry."

Harutora apologized in embarrassment, and Natsume's expression turned awkward out of astonishment.

"It's really become unstable since that time."

"For now, it's also easier to 'see' aura than before, right? But it feels a bit strange....."

"Is it too forced?"

"Yeah, maybe. After all, I went out of control at the time."

Harutora wanted to gloss it over with a smile, but Natsume didn't go along with him, staring into Harutora's eyes with clear anxiety. Harutora's face tightened awkwardly.

"Don't look so serious, it's nothing big. The thing before was just my accidental mistake."

"But."

"It's nothing. It's going to be summer vacation soon. If my condition still hasn't recovered, I'll have my dad treat it when I go back home. .....Ah, wait."

Harutora forcefully changed the topic.

"Since it's about to be summer vacation, that means it's finally been a year since we decided to become Onmyouji."

The topic Harutora suddenly brought up made Natsume blink.

"Come to think of it, that's right."

She replied, a bit surprised.

"It's already been a year since then..... Ah, time really flies."

"Really? I feel like, 'Wow, has it only been a year'."

Harutora refuted her as if amused. Natsume's lips pressed together as she seriously reminisced upon that year, furrowing her brows.

Then,

".....You're right."

She agreed and laughed quietly together with Harutora.

It had indeed been an eventful year. Because of that, they realized that they had accumulated a shocking number of experiences, although it felt as if it had passed in the blink of an eye. The incident Suzuka brought about, Harutora and Touji coming to Tokyo, meeting Kyouko and Tenma, reuniting with Suzuka and becoming close.....

Being pulled into spiritual disasters and being attacked by the legendary Onmyouji Ashiya Doman. And the incident not long ago.

"It was really hectic."

The year even stunned Harutora.

A precious year, a rare year.

Moreover,

".....Ah, yeah."

The year after that summer day. In other words, it had already been a year since he parted with Hokuto.

Harutora glanced at Natsume next to him. The pink ribbon that Natsume used to tie her long black hair. Come to think of it, it had been long ago that he suddenly started suspecting that ribbon - after the practical skills camp right after they advanced to the second year ended. In the end, he hadn't been able to ask Natsume about it. It felt a bit frightening to truly ask about.

But.....

If it were now, he could probably give the question words. Naturally, without any pretending. No matter what the answer was, he felt that he could calmly accept it.

Natsume, that ribbon,

Could it be Hokuto's--

Just then,

"Harutora-kun."

Natsume called his name again. Flustered, Harutora replied while still feigning indifference.

"Thanks."

"Eh? What?"

Natsume smiled at the lost Harutora.

"It's great that you've been with me for this year."

An unconcealed, straightforward tone. "Ah." Harutora scratched his nose.

He was embarrassed. But he was truly very happy to hear her say that. Harutora collected the question he had until just then back into his heart. At least for now, he didn't need the answer.

"......Although you might not be that reliable..."

"Although?"

"I guess you're not a bad shikigami?"

"......Yeah."

Natsume happily admitted.

Harutora harrumphed a bit smugly upon seeing his childhood friend's smile.

◎

The two of them returned to their own rooms from the dorm building roof.

Just as Harutora closed the door, Kon, who had been continually materialized since the rooftop, spoke.

"H-Harutora-sama."

She called out.

Judging by her concerned look, Harutora felt that she wanted to say something.

He unconsciously showed a wry smile.

"Kon, don't make that face. It's alright."

"B-B-But.....!"

Kon looked up at Harutora, still hesitant. But not long afterwards, she opened her mouth as if she had made a decision.

"I-If I may be so rude, I shamed Harutora-sama just now. Harutora-sama's magical energy has looked extremely unstable to Kon. It is wonderful that its strength had increased. Also, regarding your use of magical energy and grasp of aura, although you are not yet mature, it's as if you are a different person from before. However....."

The girl said in a serious voice.

"H-Harutora-sama's magical energy currently lacks stability. You can control it beautifully when you are aware, but if you're just slightly distracted, the strength will go out of control. Moreover, the level of intensity was as if you were still battling with that 'Higekiri'. That is definitely abnormal."

Kon spoke in an uncharacteristic torrent. Harutora didn't refute her, listening wordlessly.

Actually, it was just as Kon said.

He had fooled Natsume, but he couldn't fool his own shikigami, especially since Kon was a defensive shikigami. Since the battle with Higekiri - with Shaver - Harutora's aura had become extremely unstable. No, that wasn't it. Just like Kon said, it could be described as being in the dangerous state of 'frequently going out of control'.

The battle with Shaver. Harutora had gambled everything and broken his shell. So, his previously undeveloped spirit sight had improved by leaps and bounds. As a result, he could use his own magical energy and the surrounding aura more accurately, as if he could directly touch the aura. Harutora had had an unusual feeling during that battle, as if he had 'expanded'.

As expected, he had forced himself too much.

The current Harutora felt that he was 'at most only a bit different'. He ignored it and let his strength leak out. But even if it wasn't too much compared to what he had used during the battle, the amount of leaking magical energy was considerable. So Harutora was currently intentionally controlling the leaking magical energy.

Just as Kon said, this was definitely abnormal. Without a doubt, 'something' had broken inside Harutora during that fight.

But,

"......Well, nothing I can do."

Harutora didn't know exactly what had broken inside his body. But it was Harutora himself who had broken it and no other.

Harutora had made his decision when Shaver had backed them into a corner. Even if he destroyed himself, he wanted to fight, so this was alright. He couldn't complain about his current condition to anyone else. That was the end Harutora had chosen.

"So, I can't do anything about my disturbed aura right now."

"B-B-But."

"Well, it'll be fine if I just 'get used to' this condition."

He had become stronger, that was no lie.

People who obtained powerful strength had to learn ways to use that strength, they couldn't let the strength control them. For example, hadn't Touji faced the oni hidden inside his body and controlled its strength?

"After becoming Natsume's shikigami, it's important for me to obtain strength. I hope to be able to do what I can like Touji when it comes to a crucial situation, even if my dad has to put a seal on me. Kon, you too, right? I'm very happy that you're worried, but bear with me for now."

Harutora requested this, but Kon still pursed her lips, unconvinced, looking anxiously at her master. Harutora smiled to console her, putting his hand lightly on his little shikigami's head.

"Eh? Kon, have you grown a bit taller?"

"H-Harutora-sama, now isn't the time to talk about that....."

"Ah, well, you don't have to dodge the question, right? It seems like you've grown a bit....."

Harutora observed Kon's body after speaking again. On the other hand, the anxiety in Kon's heart still hadn't vanished. She pouted, which was rare for her, and glared intently at Harutora.

"Well, maybe I'm wrong."

"H-Harutora-sama!"

"Haha. Anyway, I'll sleep for today. After all, the Onmyou Academy's finally reopening tomorrow."

Harutora began preparing to sleep after he spoke, no longer paying any attention to his worried shikigami. Though Kon was still unconvinced, she hastily came over to help when she saw her master preparing the futon himself.

Not long afterward, Harutora's room went dark as they said goodnight to each other. The stubborn Kon seemed to have given up as well. She dematerialized and returned to a standby state. Not long afterwards arose the sound of Harutora's healthy breathing.

How dangerous was his current self?

Harutora's self-awareness was still too naive.

Part 2

Heat and noise filled the gaps of the jumbled Shibuya district.

The road gave off heat as if it had lost to the radiating sunlight. The air was filled with exhaust and the cry of cicadas sounded from somewhere. Also, there was an endless flow of people.

The people that walked on the road had all changed to light clothing to match the summer season. They stopped in the stores with air conditioning or in dark shade, temporarily cooling off.

"......It's been a long time since I wore the Onmyou Academy uniform."

Harutora muttered.

"How could we wear that kind of uniform in the summer."

"......Yeah."

Touji, who walked next to Harutora, nodded agreement upon hearing Harutora's personal thoughts. The Onmyou Academy uniform was modeled after court clothing, and they had a very strange design. Though they were less stuffy than they looked like and comfortable when actually worn, the male uniform was the color of crow feathers - a black with a bit of a blue - so no matter what, it would feel hot. Touji also had a bandanna tied around his forehead, making it even hotter. But he looked better than Harutora on the outside, the reason probably being a problem of their individual tolerances.

Natsume, who followed behind Harutora, also wore the same clothing as the two of them, but she didn't seem hot. Her black hair, tied with a pink ribbon, gave off a cool impression instead.

But to her, she didn't have the leisure to worry about the temperature in the first place.

As they walked on the road to the Onmyou Academy, the number of figures wearing academy student uniforms increased the closer they got to the academy building. At the same time, the number of gazes shooting towards Natsume became more than before.

Some exclaimed "Ah". Some whispered secretly. Some constantly peeked over towards them.

"......Looks like..."

Touji showed a fearless smile, watching the reactions of the students passing by.

"Or maybe I should say that, as expected, word of 'Natsume's matter' seems to have gotten around."

"....."

Harutora pursed his mouth as he listened to his good friend's sarcastic words.

He glanced back, checking on Natsume.

Natsume wasn't cowed by the curious gazes looking at her, or at least she was maintaining calm on the outside. But she looked a bit paler than usual, or maybe that was just Harutora's mistake.

The Mystical Crime Investigation Division's sweeping operation against the Twin-Horned Syndicate had left huge scars inside and outside the Onmyou Agency.

At the end of this operation, an unexpected chain reaction of spiritual disasters had been brought forth in the Exorcist Bureau Meguro branch. At the time, the Onmyou Academy had been out of use because of Ashiya Doman's attack, and the students

had been borrowing the Meguro branch location for classes. Of course, that was true of Harutora and the others as well.

Moreover, it hadn't just been spiritual disasters attacking Harutora and the others. The Divine General Kagami Reiji's servant shikigami Shaver had been present and had ended up going out of control upon being submerged in high-density miasma. He had raised his blade at Natsume, who he originally should have been protecting.

The fight with the out-of-control Shaver could be described as a desperate battle.

During the battle, Natsume's true identity - the fact that she was actually a female posing as a male while attending the Onmyou Academy - had been revealed.

"Natsume had a lot of attention inside the academy in the first place. The rumor that 'she's actually a girl' really spread instantly."

Touji chatted while shooting a cold gaze at the students who stared at Natsume. The students who felt Touji's gaze turned their heads in a panic, quickly walking away.

In the end, because of the spiritual disaster and Shaver's rampage, the Meguro branch had fallen into a half-destroyed state, and of course they couldn't continue borrowing the bureau building. The Onmyou Academy had helplessly decided to halt classes and let the students return home.

Yesterday, they had finally received notice that the academy building repairs were complete.

"Really..... I thought everyone was waiting at home. Why do even people who weren't there at the time know?"

"Nowadays, the spread of information is completely unrelated to your location. That's the same for students in the dorm, too."

Harutora went silent again after hearing Touji's words.

The last incident had carried huge effects, and the confusion among the personnel still hadn't completely stabilized. Hence, Natsume's punishment for falsifying her gender hadn't been decided, and it would be delayed.

But it was good that Natsume hadn't been kicked out of the male dorm immediately. The male dorm's female manager had been extremely shocked when she learned of this matter and had fallen into a panic, but she had decided herself that until the Onmyou Academy decided on an official punishment, she would still 'formally' treat Natsume as a male student. On the other hand, she had taken care of all the finer details like setting aside a dedicated time for bathing. Thanks to her, things had gone smoothly for Natsume after that incident without her having to change her living habits.

But the reactions of the dorm residents were greatly different. Perhaps this was natural, as the friend that had been male up until yesterday had suddenly became female. Since she had Harutora and Touji as guards and because Natsume's power had long since been a topic of conversation, no one came to confront her. However, it seemed that they lost their past candid interactions with her and watched from afar, holding their grudges.

"Maybe all of the students know, but the teachers don't - that's possible."

"That would be troublesome in its own way too. But the principal's definitely heard, right? From Kyouko--"

Harutora closed his mouth. Touji also noticed and didn't continue speaking.

Principal Kurahashi was Kyouko's grandmother. It was logical that she had learned about Natsume from Kyouko's mouth..... but it wasn't certain. Kyouko had received the greatest shock after learning about Natsume's true gender. It was doubtful whether she would talk about this incident, even to her grandmother.

"......This is terrible. We shouldn't need to announce it ourselves..... right?"

"Well, for now, let's stay silent. As long as no one asks, isn't it fine for us to maintain this situation for now?"

His good friend responded to Harutora's worries. Touji was in a relaxed position that wasn't directly related, so that was why he could objectively make such a proposal. Harutora replied with a grunt.

Just then,

"H-Harutora-kun! Touji-kun!"

"......Hah, a gloomy expression just like I imagined."

A male student walked towards them from the direction of the academy building, with a female student following behind him. Seeing his face for the first time in a while made Harutora's expression relax.

"Yo, Tenma! Suzuka's with you too, huh. It feels like I haven't seen you for a long, long time."

"Hah, you can talk. Weren't you texting me all the time while I was waiting at home?"

"...What are you saying, weren't you waiting anxiously for Harutora-kun and the others by yourself even before I got here?"

"Hey! Glasses! Don't go making up whatever delusions you want! I wasn't waiting at all, I just got here!"

Tenma's friendly words made Suzuka glare in a panic. The knot in Harutora's heart seemed to alleviate slightly upon seeing the unchanging attitudes of the two of them.

"You two, what did you do when you were waiting?"

"Nothing special. I studied by myself at home."

"The Mystical Investigators had me go over a lot for their investigation. But....."

Suzuka thought for a while and then didn't continue speaking. "But?" Touji urged her to go on with a sharp look.

".....I'm not too sure, but the situation was different from before. They were a bit unstable."

"That kind of incident happened after all, so isn't it reasonable?

"The investigation was several days after the incident happened. .....Although I'm not too sure, it seems that the Mystical Investigators have their own business."

Suzuka's ponytails swayed as she shrugged her shoulders. Though Suzuka was one of the Twelve Divine Generals, her strength was currently being sealed and she was under the Mystical Investigators' supervision, so she couldn't get ahold of any information from inside the Onmyou Agency.

Harutora replied back indifferently, but he suddenly noticed that the shrugging Suzuka held a rolled-up piece of paper in her hand.

"Suzuka? What are you holding?"

"Eh, well, this is....."

Suzuka quickly hid the paper in her hand behind her back, a bit panicked for some reason. Harutora, Touji, and Tenma all looked at Suzuka with suspicious gazes.

But,

".....Tenma-kun."

Natsume, who had been silently standing behind Harutora, spoke after seemingly making up her mind. Her voice showed unconcealable tension.

Tenma and Natsume looked at each other. "Morning." He replied back with an unyielding attitude.

"It must have been tough on you before. Are you still in the male dorm now? Are things alright? Everyone in the dorm knows, right?"

"Y, Yeah..... it's alright. But I'm a bit ostracized....."

"Ahaha, I know what you mean. Everyone's confused. Fortunately, nothing big happened. We'll see how the Onmyou Academy deals with it. If it's the principal, there shouldn't be a huge punishment."

"Tenma-kun....."

It wasn't stiff courtesy, he was still kindly worrying about her. Natsume was deeply relieved after seeing his attitude. "Thanks." Tenma showed an embarrassed smile. "You're overstating it."

But Natsume's actions weren't overstated. Until the incident a few days ago, Tenma hadn't known Natsume's true identity. He might not have treated Natsume any more kindly than the other students, and it would have been natural for him to get mad or hold a grudge. Tenma's character and heart could be seen from the fact that he treated Natsume naturally without revealing such attitudes.

"Uuu~ Tenma! Although I thought so before, you really are a good person!"

"Even Harutora-kun's talking like that. Can you not? This is very ordinary, right? I feel like I'm being taken for an idiot when you always praise me as being a good person....."

"No, no, Tenma. You're a rare good person far above the ordinary. They're already very few now, so be proud."

"Touji-kun too..... Hey, stop, it's so hot!"

Harutora and Touji draped themselves over Tenma's shoulders on either side, nodding their heads exaggeratedly. Tenma, sandwiched by the two of them, wrinkled up his face and frowned. Natsume giggled. At the same time, Suzuka looked at her merry male companions with a look saying she was staying out of this.

"Ah, but, right. Natsume... kun, can you still stay the same as before? How did you live in the academy before? Although you're also dressed as a male today."

"......I want to stay this way while the Onmyou Academy hasn't issued any punishment."

"Because of that 'family tradition'?"

"Yeah."

Natsume nodded.

The reason Natsume dressed as a male and hid her gender from the people around her was because of her main family's 'family tradition' that 'the one who inherits the Tsuchimikado family must show himself as a male to outsiders'. That was why the Tsuchimikado's next head Natsume entered the Onmyou Academy posing as a male. Though this 'family tradition' was not to be made public, she had told Tenma about it after the battle with Shaver.

Suzuka hmphed.

"Now that you mention it, it's such a strange 'family tradition', that even the Kurahashi branch family has no knowledge of it."

"You researched Yakou, so it's not strange that you know."

"Huh? I said so many times, my specialty is just Tsuchimikado Yakou's 'magic'. I have no interest at all in his family's traditions."

Suzuka tapped her shoulder with her paper from just before, replying annoyedly.

Suzuka knew of Natsume's true identity because she had seen Natsume dressed as a miko in the commotion one year ago. Though it had become rarer and rarer recently, she had often used that fact to threaten them when she had just learned Natsume was a female after entering the academy. She couldn't do such a thing anymore now.

Tenma seemed to be a bit concerned.

"But with this, won't Natsume end up breaking the family tradition? Will there be any punishment?"

"......I'm not sure."

"Eh? But your father should know already, right? About Natsume's gender being exposed already."

"Well....."

Natsume didn't reply immediately, meeting Harutora's gaze seemingly awkwardly. Harutora helplessly explained for her.

"Actually, she hasn't told her parents. They haven't said anything yet either."

"Eh? But the Meguro branch incident became big news. Your family didn't contact you?"

"Not at all. Natsume's mom already passed away, and her dad basically doesn't contact her. Right now they only meet about once a year..... Wait. Come to think of it, my family didn't contact me either. Really, there should be a limit to letting me do what I want."

"......I, I see. Could it be the Tsuchimikado family's style?"

Tenma was a bit dazed after hearing Harutora's explanation. Though their family had declined, it was still hard to imagine that the family that was once dominant over Onmyoudou would be like this.

"I think I would have to report to him first."

Natsume, feeling bad, spoke. Harutora didn't continue her words, tactfully chiming in, "She doesn't get along well with her dad." Tenma seemed to be a bit surprised, but he didn't say anything more about the family situation of others.

With a sarcastic tone, Touji said:

"If you don't tell him, you might be able to fool him until you graduate."

"It would be scary if that worked. Natsume's dad is very strict about family matters. Maybe it would be better to confess first rather than having the secret revealed later....."

Harutora glanced at his childhood friend out of the corner of his eye, seeming to still want to say something. Natsume replied "yeah" with a downcast gaze.

Natsume had very strong self-awareness of herself as the next Tsuchimikado family head. Even if she wasn't very good at dealing with her father, she had undoubtedly already prepared her resolve to accept the guilt for breaking the 'family tradition'.

But,

"I'll report to him as quickly and straightforwardly as possible. But..... If possible, I want to apologize to Kurahashi-san first....."

Tenma showed an understanding expression very soon after Natsume spoke.

Tenma had heard about that incident - the words that Kyouko had faulted Natsume with after the battle with Shaver ended.

"You're going to tell Kurahashi-san about the 'family tradition'?"

"Yeah. .....But, I called her several times but she didn't pick up..... And I sent a message of explanation, but I haven't gotten a reply yet."

Natsume's face fell. Tenma's expression also carried bitterness.

"I'm actually a bit worried too. I called several times."

"Tenma-kun too? Did Kurahashi-san say anything?"

"Sorry, she didn't answer my calls either. She really got quite a big shock. Also, it wasn't just a shock about Natsume being a girl, Kurahashi-san..... probably....."

Tenma's words became vague at this point, his tone still containing no intent of blaming Natsume. But Natsume seemed to feel hurt by the problem Tenma pointed out, gritting her teeth.

Of course, it wasn't just Natsume. Harutora also felt ashamed of himself. After all, Kyouko had confessed her feelings - that she loved Natsume - to Harutora. But Harutora had concealed Natsume's true identity. Harutora's sin was even heavier than Natsume's for treading over Kyouko's feelings.

Liar.

That was right. He couldn't refute it.

Harutora and Natsume went silent. Tenma quietly cast Touji a pleading gaze, but Touji was also helpless about this. He just closed his eyes without saying a word, lightly shaking his head as if expressing that he could do nothing. Even Touji was the same as Harutora and Natsume in the sense of 'knowing but not saying it'.

The first-year Suzuka watched this group of second-years, impatiently - as if she couldn't bear to watch - tapping on the road with the tip of her foot.

".....You reap what you sow. Things have gotten bad now, huh?"

"D-Dairenji-san."

"Shut up, glasses. ...Anyway, it's natural for them to get mad about Natsume hiding her 'family tradition'. If you don't want that, then all you can do is apologize and beg for forgiveness. What's there to hesitate about? It's childish."

Suzuka deliberately scoffed as if insulting them. But she became even more irritated when she saw Natsume and Harutora lower their heads instead of talking back.

"Well, that's enough." Touji smiled wryly, ending the topic.

"Starting today, you'll have to face them even if you don't want to. There should be many chances to talk."

After he said that, he urged the group who had stopped moving to walk towards the academy building.

Natsume and Harutora followed right behind him, and then was Tenma. Harutora and the others' steps were very heavy, since 'you'll have to face them even if you don't want to' had worsened their moods.

Finally, Suzuka, left in their original location, looked at her senpai who were in gloomy moods unlike before.

"Shameful."

She curled her lips.

Then, she quietly spread the paper in her hands alone.

Suzuka had an advertisement in her hands. It was a notice about a fireworks festival being held this weekend by the Sumida River.

"....."

She stared motionlessly at the advertisement as if she were saying something, and then turned towards the backs of Harutora and the others who had left first.

"......Hmph."

Suzuka roughly stuffed the commercial into the pocket of her uniform.

Harutora's group walked towards the familiar second-year classroom after entering the academy building and parting with Suzuka.

Looking around, the academy building had been completely restored to normal after the repairs. They had finally managed to return to their nostalgic school, but Harutora recalled the events of the first day after he had transferred into the Onmyou Academy.

The moment when he had walked into the classroom carrying feelings of tension and anxiety, a bit frightened because of the dignified air of the building. Even now, he still vividly remembered the curious looks and probing gazes he got after he was attached with the label of 'transfer student from the Tsuchimikado family'.

Unfamiliar faces had lined up in front of him. It was a new group of people.

In some sense, Natsume was also a new transfer student today. Her feelings right now were probably about the same as Harutora's from back then - no, they should be even more pronounced.

...Come to think of it, Kyouko and I first met on the day I transferred too.

At the start, Kyouko had treated Harutora as an enemy. But after that, they had gotten closer and closer and become friendly mutual companions. Could the same process repeat itself again?

...No.

It couldn't. But they could only try and take the plunge. Had their relationship with Kyouko weakened to the point where even this couldn't patch it up?

Thinking about these things, Harutora and the others walked into the classroom.

Class hadn't started yet. The classroom was noisy, and the clamor on the first day after class restarted even reached the corridor outside the room. Harutora unconsciously swallowed.

He held the door handle, looking back at Natsume. Natsume watched Harutora and nodded.

He opened the door.

Right when Harutora and the others walked into the room, the clamor quieted down like a receding tide.

They were all familiar faces. They faced classmates that they recognized, who held gazes so complex that they were hard to express in words.

The reactions of their classmates adequately expressed that they already knew Natsume's true gender. Moreover..... was it his imagination? None of the gazes cast towards Natsume seemed to hold such intentions.

Liar.

...Argh!

He couldn't keep enduring. Even if he made excuses, he had to say something. Harutora impulsively thought of stepping forward.

But his shoulder was grabbed by the person behind him.

It was Natsume. "Natsume?" She didn't respond to the stunned Harutora, nervously walking forward in place of Harutora instead.

She walked to the podium alone, her back straight. Needless to say, the students in the classroom all silently stared at Natsume. In that tense atmosphere, Natsume walked to the lectern, her black hair fluttering, and sternly faced her classmates.

Then, she stood tall.

She deeply bowed her head.

"......Natsume."

Faint gasps sounded throughout the classrooms, and the area went stiff.

This was the first time most of the students had seen the bowed head of Natsume, the Onmyou Academy's genius and the next head of the Tsuchimikado family.

Natsume didn't say anything at all. Since she couldn't break the 'tradition', she couldn't respond to her classmates' questions. So she didn't say a word and just bowed her head to admit her wrongdoing. She at least wanted to convey her apologies.

The silence still continued, but Natsume still didn't move at all, silently bowing her head. Harutora watched for a moment and finally couldn't take it anymore, walking towards the podium where Natsume was.

Just then.

"Tsuchimikado!"

A male student stood up from his seat and shouted. Harutora turned around, and Natsume unconsciously raised her head.

The male student who had rose continued speaking with a red face and a rough tone.

"Th-Thanks a lot for before! At the time - I was also in the Meguro branch training room. I probably would have died if you hadn't come. Really, thank you so much!"

"......Ah."

Natsume's eyes slightly widened. Harutora also recalled it. At the time, they had been pursued by Shaver and escaped into the training room. He was one of the students who had been taking refuge there.

Right afterwards,

"M-Me too!"

Several female students stood up.

"Me too, I was saved thanks to Natsume-kun and you guys. You're my saviors."

"W-Well..... But. It was because we escaped in there that you guys got involved....."

Natsume responded with a dazed tone.

The male student who had spoken up at the start smiled.

"We might not have been saved even if we stayed hidden. No matter how you look at it, it was all because of you guys that we ended up being rescued."

"Y-Yeah. Natsume-kun isn't at fault for anything. I'm very thankful!"

"....."

Natsume stood in place, dazed. Harutora gritted his teeth, seeming to have trouble holding back his tears.

The tense atmosphere was alleviated and the classroom became noisy again. Of course, there were some people who gave them cold or distasteful gazes. But at this moment, Harutora felt incomparably joyful that he had properly heard his classmates' thanks in front of everyone.

After all, it wasn't just companions around him. The time they spent together would influence both sides, even if it was a slow, gradual process. That was true for both their classmates as well as Natsume. Her first-year self would probably have a hard time doing such a thing towards her classmates even if her identity were exposed.

Heat welled up in the corner of Natsume's eyes.

"......Thank you."

She quietly said those words, her body trembling slightly.

But just then, the classroom door was opened again and a student walked in.

Natsume and Harutora instantly went completely stiff.

It was Kyouko.

"Kurahashi-san."

Tenma, who was the farthest back, greeted her, hastily allowing her through the space in front of the door.

Kyouko stopped upon seeing the situation inside the classroom, standing still as if petrified. Her eyes widened in her pale expression and she quivered slightly. It was understandable that her classmates shot her suspicious looks. Most people knew of the close relationship between her, Natsume, and the others, and they had fought together in that incident. But however, they had trouble understanding Natsume, Kyouko, and Harutora's current reactions.

"......Kurahashi-san."

Natsume greeted her as if struggling to, but also as if she were searching for support. A chill also ran through Kyouko as if she had come in contact with something cold.

"....."

Kyouko still averted her gaze with a stiff face. Natsume couldn't open her mouth anymore.

Harutora walked towards Kyouko.

"Kyouko, let me explain--"

But the stubborn Kyouko didn't pay Harutora any heed. She walked straight to her own seat.

Her classmates also lost their enthusiasm from before, starting to become noisy. Tenma looked back and forth uneasily, and Touji sighed.

He walked next to Harutora and clapped him on the shoulder.

"......Well, we'll talk about it later."

"......Ah."

Harutora nodded gloomily upon hearing his good friend's calm words.

Part 3

Their first class was unrelated to Onmyoudou, but instead was an explanation of many matters about the Onmyou Academy. Ohtomo Jin had originally been the homeroom teacher of Harutora's class, but he was in the hospital. Another teacher stood on the podium in his place.

He explained that the academy building repairs had already finished, about their sudden stays at home, touched upon trivial matters regarding restarting the curriculum, and their class schedule for the future. He also spoke about the general situation that had happened at the Exorcist Bureau Meguro branch. But there wasn't any particularly attention-worthy information to the student. As they predicted - though maybe the teacher himself didn't know - there was no explanation about Natsume's business.

During the break time after their first class.

"Wait, Kyouko!"

Harutora ran into the corridor, chasing after Kyouko who had swiftly left the classroom. Kyouko should have heard Harutora's voice, but she didn't stop. She even sped up. Harutora clicked his tongue, continuing to chase.

Harutora felt that it was best to talk with Kyouko as soon as possible, as it was getting harder and harder to speak up. Moreover, Harutora hoped to apologize beforehand on his own while Natsume wasn't there.

She caught up to her around a corner,

"Kyouko."

And grabbed her shoulder.

Kyouko unconsciously twisted her body and pushed him away with her hands. Harutora also immediately relaxed his grip. But because of this, he was finally able to be face-to-face with her.

"...Sorry."

The apology was first, so he would say it before thinking. Kyouko lowered her head, biting her lip.

"Kyouko, sorry. But please listen to my explanation. I won't ask you to forgive me..... But I at least want to talk with you first."

Kyouko didn't say a word to Harutora, who was the only one speaking. But Harutora didn't back down. He quickly adjusted his tone, and his words became calmer.

"Did you see my message? I wrote about Natsume's reasons there. Although that 'family tradition' is unreasonable, you know her personality, right? As long as it's a regulation of the Tsuchimikado family, she'll choose to obey it no matter how unreasonable and hard to accept it is. That girl does her best in her own way. Otherwise, she wouldn't have done something reckless like coming to the Onmyou Academy posing as a male. Of course, it was my fault for hiding it from you, and I'm really regretful. So I wanted to at least come to apologize to you. Please let me express my apologies."

Harutora wove his words with all his power. Just as he had said to Natsume yesterday night, he could only patiently apologize to her face. There was nothing he could do other than convey his sincerity with all his might.

He would get closer step by step to reach even the slightest understanding. Then.....

"I....."

Kyouko opened her mouth hesitantly. Harutora corrected his posture.

"......I said before."

"What?"

"I met a boy at Natsume's home before. Then..... I started liking him....."

Kyouko lowered her head, continuing her words in short snippets as if talking to herself. Harutora listened carefully, focusing his mind on Kyouko as she spoke.

"......Ah, I heard. Something from when you were small. You said, well, love at first sight....."

"....."

"Sorry. But actually, Natsume....."

"A boy."

Kyouko interrupted Harutora's words, speaking resolutely.

Harutora didn't know what Kyouko's words meant and was a bit confused. Kyouko raised her head to stare at Harutora.

They looked at each other. Her clear, pretty eyes explored Harutora's heart.

"He was very nice, and didn't hate me for being arrogant when we first met. I remember very clearly that he nodded when I asked him if he was called Tsuchimikado. That person..... he was a boy."

That shouldn't be. You've got it wrong. Harutora thought of how to tactfully refute Kyouko in order to keep from hurting her.....

He froze.

...Are you the boy who lives here?

...Eh? No.

...Liar. Aren't you Tsuchimikado?

...Ah, yeah. Well. But.....

Natsume, who was sick, was sleeping. He had met an unfamiliar girl in the courtyard. The two of them had searched the courtyard - for a missing ribbon.

Right.

...Okay? Don't forget, because it's a promise.

Harutora's mind went white, as if his heart had stopped beating.

Kyouko seemed to notice something from Harutora's expression. A blush emerged on her face, and she walked away while trembling lightly to conceal the fact that she had gone too far.

Harutora didn't dare chase after Kyouko's departing back, as if his body would crumble into pieces if he took a single step.

Kyouko's back vanished in the end of the corridor, but Harutora still remained motionless as if he had been paralyzed.

Just then,

".....How's the heroic sacrifice?"

Someone spoke to him from behind. "Touji." Harutora replied in a voice that sounded like a different person's.

It seemed that he had come take a look out of worry for him. Tenma had come too.

"A-Are you alright, Harutora-kun? Why are you so pale?"

"Tenma..... Where's Natsume?"

"She's still in the classroom. She was suddenly surrounded by a couple of people, but she should manage..... So? It seems that I guessed right, you sacrificed yourself quite heroically, but can you explain the situation a bit? How did Kyouko react?"

"......No....."

"Huh? Hey, hey, why did even you change like this. Did something happen?"

Touji furrowed his brows in surprise, but Harutora had trouble opening his mouth to explain.

Actually, his heart was still in disarray and his mind had stopped working. Touji looked at Harutora with a stunned expression, and traded looks with Tenma not long afterwards. The two of them could only tilt their heads, not knowing what to do.

"Oh my. This time I'm standing on the side that's getting things concealed from them. It's not really convincing, no matter what I say..... Tenma. Sorry for bringing you trouble, but could you go chat with Kyouko a bit?"

Touji stopped paying attention to the lifeless Harutora, making a request of Tenma a bit apologetically. Other than Kyouko, Tenma was the only other person among their companions who hadn't known about Natsume's secret. Also, Tenma had known Kyouko the longest among their group, so he was the most suitable to smooth things over now.

But Tenma didn't reply immediately.

Touji peeked at the responseless friend. Tenma had his arms crossed, thinking.

"Tenma?"

"Ah, yeah, I'm listening."

Tenma looked up and replied.

Then, he looked towards Touji.

"But, it will probably be very difficult even for me. It's probably not our problem....."

Tenma's reply was very unexpected to Touji.

Tenma showed his unique gentle smile, making a different proposal.

"Rather, although I'm not sure if it will be effective, why don't you let me ask someone else to help?"

Liar.

She hadn't originally planned on saying those words. She had originally thought she was a more tolerant person. She had been thinking continuously when she had been staying at home.

She hadn't picked up the phone because she didn't want to speak directly. She hadn't replied to his messages because she thought that she couldn't convey herself clearly through those means. She wanted to seriously apologize. So she had stayed silent, waiting until now.

The next time they met, she would try taking back those words, pretending they didn't exist, and then returning to their original relationship. She made her decision countless times. She had told herself that countless times.

But she still hadn't been able to do it.

Once she saw Natsume and Harutora in the classroom, the lines she had practiced many times vanished into nothingness. She couldn't control herself. She should at least escape first, but she hadn't run away.

In the end, she had faced Harutora and made those remarks.

She hadn't had any plans at all of saying those words.

She no longer had any confidence in herself, none at all. Anyway, she didn't want to be involved anymore and she hoped that she wouldn't get shaken again.

So.

She kept a stiff upper lip and avoided Harutora and Natsume for the whole day.

After school.

Kyouko, who was the first to rise, forced herself to ignore the gazes around her, leaving the classroom without looking back. Though she didn't plan on leaving the academy building, she stayed away from the corridor for now.

Before she realized it, she was already sitting in the emergency stairwell set along the outside wall of the academy building.

Why had she come here? The current Kyouko didn't want to understand the reasons behind it. The landing of this emergency stairwell was a place where Harutora's group often gathered. Maybe she would meet Harutora and Natsume if she came here. Why had she come here while fleeing left and right?

It was as if she were waiting while running away.

"What....."

Kyouko sat down with a plop, curling her hair with a finger.

Though she shouldn't say it herself, Kurahashi Kyouko was an 'elite', the daughter of the famous Onmyoudou family and giant in the current magic community that was the Kurahashi family. Her grades in the Onmyou Academy were excellent, and she had obtained the deep trust of her teachers. She was a core of the class. Of course, that 'way of life' was extremely difficult, but she had planned on using that as training in the first place. Whether it was for ability or personality.

So she doubted her current self even more. This wasn't her true self, she had to believe.

"......So terrible."

How would Harutora see her slip of the tongue? Would he tell Natsume? She didn't want to imagine it, she wanted to vanish right away. How had things become like this? She had no idea.

But.....

"......I....."

It was hard for her to rationally control herself, and in the end she had shouted 'Liar' in front of those two. Unintentionally, she had ended up revealing the truth about her childhood matters to Harutora.

Then,

Doing the above things was the other side of Kurahashi Kyouko, which couldn't be described with 'elite'. Impulsive, reckless actions. Perhaps these actions were even closer to Kurahashi Kyouko's true 'core' that she had bared.

In the end, she hadn't forgiven Harutora and Natsume. However she looked at it.

"....."

Kyouko, still sitting on the stairs, hung her head in low spirits, inadvertently covering her face with her hands.

It was the first time she experienced this. Secretly, she had evaluated herself as the most mature among her companions. That wasn't the case at all. She was this immature one layer down.

Natsume was a girl.

The person she had adored since childhood wasn't Natsume, it was Harutora.

But now that she knew this, Kyouko still couldn't make sense of her emotions.

She had only finally realized how kindly he treated her in the past few days. She hated herself for that. Had she truly liked Natsume? If she did - why hadn't she noticed? Her childhood memories and the adoration she had kept until now were both genuine. They should be true. But why had she naturally accepted this change in the status quo? Could it be that she was just obsessed with the illusion that she had created herself? Was it just a form of self-satisfaction, thinking she was incredible while wallowing in her 'beautiful unrequited love'?

It was stupid.

"......It really is stupid....."

Her mood became more and more depressed as she let her thoughts swirl around.

Was this lovesickness?

Or, was there nothing that she could call love in the first place.....

A one-man show about complacently loving herself.....

She was such a joke.....

Just then,

"Uwah, how gloomy. What's this. You scared me."

She thought her heart was about to explode.

She suddenly raised her head. Then, she met eyes with the person who had passed through the door half-blocking the stairway and was peering over.

She saw dyed-golden ponytails from the gap.

"......S-Suzuka-chan....."

"You..... Can you cut that out? Just watching feels unpleasant..... I'm getting squeamish."

Those unsympathetic and impolite words made Kyouko's face redden. Suzuka's face was still bitter after seeing Kyouko's reaction, but not long afterwards she walked out from the academy building to the emergency staircase as if she had thought of something.

"What are you doing anyway?"

"I-I, nothing....."

"Nothing? You've got your arms wrapped around your knees. If I had to say, it's full of the feeling of a girl troubled with love, you know? Also, it's the one-sided, self-indulgent kind? How creepy~ I don't want to touch it directly. You better put an end to that feeling quickly, you know? It's painful."

It was probably rare for her to endure venomous insults. Though she was currently hating herself, she still hoped that Suzuka appreciated her last bit of rationality that kept her from pouncing on her.

"......Suzuka-chan, did you come to pick a fight?"

"What are you joking about. I don't have that kind of free time."

"Then for what?"

"Why I came..... Someone requested that I come and check the situation. I don't care myself, but that glasses lowering his head and pleading was a bit troublesome....."

Suzuka turned her head to look away and Kyouko blinked.

"......Tenma?"

"Yeah. That guy's attitude is unexpectedly firm, and he forced me to come. He's so inconspicuous though. I originally thought he was a guy who knew his own place. How annoying."

The constantly complaining Suzuka furrowed her brows in seeming irritation. How exactly had he pleaded? Kyouko, who had been friends with Tenma for a long time, couldn't conceal her surprise.

But it had indeed been a good move to ask Suzuka to come. Needless to say, Harutora and Natsume couldn't come, and Kyouko would run away even if it were Touji or Tenma who appeared. Suzuka was the only one right now who could make Kyouko return to her former attitude. But even Tenma hadn't anticipated things suddenly becoming like this.

Kyouko suddenly broke out into light, bitter laughter. Though it was bitter, this was the first time she had smiled today.

"......Suzuka-chan..... Suzuka-chan, did you know? About Natsume-kun."

"That she's a girl? Yeah. It was really laughable to watch."

"When did you realize?"

"Well, since the beginning - since I ran into them at her home."

With that, Kyouko realized. Suzuka's strength was currently being sealed by the Onmyou Agency as punishment for the incident she had brought about last year. She had heard that the summer incident was the first time Suzuka met Harutora and Natsume, and had also become the juncture leading to Harutora transferring into the Onmyou Academy.

"......I see. You wouldn't have realized if you hadn't known them before."

"I wouldn't have realized if I hadn't known them before? How unreasonable. .....Well, although her aura is disguised pretty well."

That was true. Looking back now that she knew the truth, Natsume's male disguise could only be described as a mess. Natsume had probably been counting on always keeping a distance from others like she had when she had just entered the academy. When she entered the Onmyou Academy, Natsume had originally held no intention of establishing close relationships with anyone else.

But Natsume had changed since Harutora and Touji transferred in. It wasn't just the two of them, it had also been Kyouko herself. If Natsume's disguise was described as a bomb, the three of them had all lit the fuse in unison.

Natsume hadn't concealed her identity out of ill intent, she was probably just doing as she should. Wasn't it Kyouko who had one-sidedly liked her and willfully become frustrated?

She hated herself even more.....

"Also,"

Suzuka suddenly opened her mouth. Kyouko turned her head.

"Have you changed a bit? Why are you so depressed now."

"What do you mean, 'changed'?"

"Weren't you in a fit of anger? What about now? You're the side that got tricked."

"B-But, Natsume-kun didn't mean to hide it..... There's a reason, right? Because of the Tsuchimikado family tradition--"

Suzuka raised her eyebrow upon seeing Kyouko starting to make excuses for some reason.

"I said..."

She continued speaking irritably:

"That just means she thinks 'family tradition' is more important than her friends, right? Touji and I both knew before, but we didn't tell anyone, so she could have told you in private, right? To think she hates breaking her 'tradition' that much? ...She doesn't even mind fooling her companions?"

"That....."

Suzuka's direct and brusque words left Kyouko speechless.

Suzuka crossed her arms, irritably tapping the stairs with her finger.

"That's what led to all these problems, right? Love? Hate? That's not what you should be complaining about. The issue isn't whether she was hiding it on purpose or not. Things became this troublesome because she didn't communicate properly, right? Why don't you just go yell 'what the hell!' at her? It's fine even if you make them kneel for forgiveness! Why are you being depressed out here on your own?"

Then, Suzuka craned her neck, glaring at Kyouko to her face with narrowed eyes.

"The 'other party' is the one that's 'wrong', right?"

"......Yeah....."

She inadvertently nodded like a child. "See." Suzuka's expression became overjoyed and she nodded her head exaggeratedly.

".....But, that group of fools knows that they made a mistake now. Hurry up and go scold them and whip them raw. Let them know exactly how arrogant, impassive, and self-assertive they are. Go make them wear the word 'dumbass' on their foreheads for a month or make them apologize ten thousand times!"

"Suzuka-chan....."

Those methods were probably a bit poorly thought out. But Suzuka's clumsy gentleness warmed her heart, and she couldn't help but think of what she had spoken while pretending to be amazing during the practical skills camp to let Suzuka open her heart. It probably wasn't only Natsume and Harutora that were conceited, she was probably the same.

A vague, tangled feeling continuously expanded and Kyouko's nose started dripping. Suzuka became a bit panicked, seeming not to know how to deal with this.

"Those guys are so insidious. They say so much one-sided impolite nonsense to others like they know everything, but they're full of lies! Natsume too, that Bakatora too, they're being so secretive about that shikigami Hokuto's business! They always want other people to think of something for them!"

Suzuka became more and more zealous, continuously bad-mouthing Harutora and Natsume. It seemed that she had accumulated a lot of grudges. But on the other hand, this was proof that she had always been paying attention to the two. In contrast, Kyouko revealed a smile as she saw Suzuka spewing abuse.

But there was something she was very interested in.

".....Hey, Suzuka-chan. If by 'Hokuto's business' you mean Harutora and Natsume-kun's servant shikigami, didn't we know about that a long time ago?"

"Not that dragon. It's not that Hokuto--"

After she spoke to this point, Suzuka finally realized that she was speaking about things she hadn't planned to.

She showed weakness and confusion in front of the dazed Kyouko. But she had just criticized Natsume's attitude, and it would be very hypocritical if she did the same thing right away.

"Didn't Bakatora talk about it during the camp? When you asked who he liked....."

She finally recalled it when she heard this. Hokuto. Harutora had mentioned it during the camp, the simple shikigami controlled from a long distance that he had always believed to be human. 'I want to see her again.' Harutora missed that shikigami girl.

...Eh?

Kyouko also realized after it was brought up again.

"W-Wait. Natsume-kun didn't tell him?"

Suzuka showed a bitter expression before Kyouko's confirmation.

"I don't have enough proof to make her confess. But..... If you consider it objectively, there shouldn't be any doubts, right? There aren't any other possibilities."

"....."

What was up with that? The two of them were still concealing things from each other? Hokuto's true identity was Natsume? Really? In that case, then Natsume knew that Harutora had always been concerned about Hokuto, right? In any case, why did Natsume take the trouble to use a shikigami like Hokuto? Also, why had she kept her mouth shut about it up till now?

"Anyway!" Suzuka continued rambling upon seeing Kyouko go silent.

"You don't have to feel bad about those guys. Hurry up and reconcile with them! I have plans!"

"......Plans?"

"Wh-What? Everyone has plans, right!? Alright, hurry up and go get mad at them!"

For some reason, Suzuka shouted back with a red face at Kyouko's indifferent question. In any case, Suzuka was indeed doing her best for Kyouko. She herself also felt unhappy and uncomfortable with Kyouko and the others' current situation. Upon thinking that she had even gotten Suzuka to feel sorry for her, she inadvertently became joyful even if Suzuka was still using her own methods to cheer her up.

But,

"......Sorry, that's still a bit hard to do now..... I think."

She didn't have the self-confidence right now to face Harutora and Natsume and talk properly. Though it was shameful, that was reality.

Suzuka just showed a disquieted, hurt expression upon seeing Kyouko's self-deprecating response, feeling that her lobbying had ended up useless.

But at least Suzuka had expressed her feelings to Kyouko and her wish to be on Kyouko's 'side'. Even if it was just out of politeness, Kyouko did her best to smile.

"Suzuka-chan."

She stood up from the stairs and then crouched in front of Suzuka.

"Thanks."

She hugged her tightly.

Suzuka suddenly became flustered. "Hey! What are you doing!" She panicked, escaping from Kyouko's clutches with a red face. She suddenly stepped back, her eyes wide and her body stiff. This reaction, like that of a small animal not used to

intimate contact, made a smile bloom on Kyouko's face - this time, it was very natural.

Then,

"Huh? Suzuka-chan, did you drop something?"

"......Eh? ...Ah!"

A sheet of messily folded paper had dropped from the pocket of Suzuka's uniform. It seemed to be an advertisement. Kyouko picked it up first and opened it.

A notification about the Sumida River Fireworks Festival. She inadvertently looked at Suzuka.

"N-No! Let me tell you, there's no meaning behind this! I was just carrying it because I wanted to doodle on the back! It had nothing to do with what you're thinking at all!"

It seemed to be just as Kyouko imagined. Suzuka's 'plans' were undoubtedly this fireworks festival. She checked the date. It was this weekend, which meant the day after tomorrow.

...Hmm.

She couldn't postpone this indefinitely, it would have to end someday. For Suzuka and for herself.

"......I understand, Suzuka-chan. So wait a bit, please, just wait a little longer....."

Part 4

... 'He was a boy.'

That evening, Harutora couldn't sleep.

Kyouko's impulsive confession kept repeating itself in his mind, as if his brain were being violently beaten with no warning. For now, he had no idea what he would do in the future.

He had returned to the classroom afterwards and didn't have anything to talk about even when he saw Natsume. Touji and Tenma had been mystified and tilted their heads for the whole time, and Natsume was also a bit anxious. But he couldn't say it, nor was he able to. His heart was still a mess.

In the end, he had helplessly welcomed in the end of school and had returned to the dorm in a daze. The only thing he could hope for was that Tenma could convince Suzuka and request her to mediate with Kyouko. Unfortunately, he hadn't heard the final outcome, so he could only hope that she did everything she could.

...But..... But, how could I remember that kind of thing?

It had been from his childhood, and it had only been a day, so there was nothing he could do about it even if he forgot. But even though he admitted that..... He indeed felt ashamed, now that he had remembered only after she had said so much. Being unlucky should have a limit.

...I really have terrible luck.....

No, thinking that was too rude to Kyouko. But, what had Kyouko been thinking when she said that? Or, did she have to say it? Was it that she couldn't keep staying silent even if saying it wouldn't help? In that case, considering her feelings, Harutora felt ashamed.

Harutora tossed and turned, wallowing in self-loathing. He passed the night like that, and hence his mind was fatigued and didn't work well. When he was finally able to catch some sleep, the summer sun that had already risen outside was painting a gray dawn.

...I have to go to the academy building again..... And then..... then what.....

Already exhausted, he finally lost consciousness a short while later.

He shouldn't have dreamed.

But.....

"Harutora-sama!"

Kon's urgent shout woke Harutora up.

He was covered in sweat the moment he rose. It was already late morning, and the room was bright.

The room was filled with aura, and it was bad. Dangerous aura was being refined without any point, and it was unconsciously being discharged outside.

A doorknock sounded. It was Natsume. "Harutora-kun?" Judging from her unusual demeanor, it wasn't hard to surmise that she had noticed the abnormal situation inside the room from the corridor.

"Ah!"

Harutora jumped up, controlling the aura inside the room. Once the aura was released, it couldn't be reabsorbed. But it would be too difficult to stabilize this aura.

What should he do?

"...Kon! Bring the simple shikigami charms! Any kind will do!"

Kon, who had already materialized, swiftly brought Harutora simple shikigami charms from his bookbag. Harutora controlled the spiritual power in the room, turning it into magical energy and infusing it into the charms that were only written with basic magic. He did it all in one go while carefully avoiding an explosion.

"Get some more! Bring them all!"

"Y-Yes!"

Kon continuously threw out shikigami charms and Harutora poured magical energy into them until they reached their limits and ruptured, and finally lowered the spiritual pressure in the room. Not a single one of his shikigami charms were left when he had finally 'dispersed' the aura safely.

"......Hah....."

He exhaled deeply together with Kon and wiped his cold sweat.

He had been careless. Though he had told himself he definitely wouldn't get distracted, he had dropped his guard because of yesterday's shock.

"H-Harutora-sama. This really is....."

"......I know. But, don't tell anyone for now, please."

After Harutora asked that of his shikigami, he opened the door that had been constantly knocked on.

Natsume was standing in the corridor with a solemn expression, already wearing her uniform. Come to think of it, he hadn't checked the time yet, but she had probably been worried about the always-oversleeping Harutora and come to wake him up. Then, she had noticed the abnormality inside the room.

"Harutora-kun! What was that just now--!"

"Ah, sorry for that so early in the morning. I was kind of..... sleep-confused."

"Sleep-confused..... There was definitely something strange, right?"

"......Sorry....."

Harutora couldn't make any good excuses and showed a difficult expression. Natsume stared at Harutora, but seemed to understand that it hadn't become anything serious. She sighed deeply.

"......As expected, your aura still hadn't stabilized, right? Moreover, it's even more serious than when we talked the night before."

"Well..... You definitely can't call it good. I was originally planning to wait until summer break, but right now it seems like I should go talk with my dad as soon as possible."

"Do that. Unstable aura is definitely a huge problem for a practitioner."

Harutora became depressed after Natsume's serious words, like a child who was scolded after making a joke. Kon, on standby behind him, nodded with the same opinion as Natsume.

"Well, I'll go get ready for now so that we won't be late. Natsume, you go to the cafeteria first."

Harutora temporarily ended the topic. Natsume seemed to still be worried and looked at Harutora.

Harutora, after returning to his bed, noticed that there was a message recorded on the phone next to his pillow.

It was a text message. What? He inadvertently let out a sound upon seeing the sender when he picked up his phone.

"Amazing. He timed it as if he were here. Natsume, it's a message from my dad."

"Eh?"

Natsume's eyes also widened in surprise. After all, just like he told Tenma yesterday, his laissez-faire parents usually never contacted him of their own initiative.

It couldn't be that they only heard about the Meguro branch incident now, right? While thinking that couldn't be it, he opened his phone and looked at the contents of the message.

But,

"Hmm? .....What's up with this?'

"What is it?"

"Well..... 'We're safe, don't worry'. What's up with this?'

Harutora blankly turned the screen of the phone and Natsume also furrowed her brows.

Could it be a mistake? What did he mean, 'don't worry'. It should be Harutora who wanted care.

The two of them looked around, feeling confused.

But they immediately learned the true meaning behind that message.

"Harutora! Natsume!"

Touji rushed up the first-floor stairs and arrived in the second-floor corridor. His expression was extremely abnormal, but he definitely hadn't come running because he noticed Harutora's aura running out of control.

He revealed a rare serious look.

"Go to the cafeteria right now! Hurry!"

He just said those words and rushed back down the stairs. Harutora and Natsume went speechless for a while.

"What's up with him?"

"......Let's go see, Harutora-kun. I had a bad premonition."

Natsume jogged off and Harutora hastily followed behind her. Kon also stayed right behind her master. They went down the stairs after Touji and burst into the cafeteria on the first floor.

The dorm residents who had come to eat breakfast in the cafeteria were in a clamor, pushing each other around in front of the single medium-sized LCD TV. After they noticed Harutora and Natsume appear, they all looked back at the same time and hastily opened a path to the television.

The two of them looked attentively at the television.

A news program was currently airing. It seemed that a fire had broken out someplace and they were currently shooting real-time footage of the burned ruins. Thump. Harutora's heart suddenly beat. The building had been completely incinerated and its original appearance couldn't be distinguished. But he had some impression of this image and knew that place.

Natsume's knees buckled and she slumped down as if she had lost her backbone. Harutora and Kon unconsciously supported her - but were still speechless. Their gazes returned to the television again.

The reporter was still explaining something, but it went in one ear and out the other. He managed to make out some choppy phrases - the locally famous - historic family - Onmyoudou - those phrases pierced Harutora's body like a nightmare.

'The fire had already gone out naturally by the time the fire brigade rushed there after noticing the fire at dawn, so there is no fear of it creating a wildfire. Also, no bodies were found, but contact still hasn't been made with Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi, who lived there. Authorities are currently--'

"No way."

The residence of the Tsuchimikado main family.

The television was currently showing the scene of Natsume's burned-out old home.

Chapter 2 - The Waking Darkness

Part 1

The elementary and middle school Natsume attended was a traditional school that was on the verge of being shut down.

She was the only student in her year, and she didn't have a good relationship with her senpais and kouhais either. It was a stifling place. Because the Tsuchimikados were both local celebrities and a family of unknown origins, the other students - and the teachers – avoided getting unnecessarily involved with the child of this family. Natsume was always alone.

She learned of the rumor that she was Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation in elementary school. That rumor led Natsume to forgo taking the initiative to interact with others. She shouldn't involve other people. She was scared, alone and helpless.

So, Natsume used her alone time to practice magic, calmly accepting her father's increasingly strict tutelage. That was her fate for being born into the Tsuchimikado family. A solitary life where she couldn't get close to others.

But that Natsume had an important friend. Natsume was only no longer alone when she was with that boy. No, even if no one were around her, Natsume could just think of that boy to forget her loneliness.

It might have been because of that boy that she was able to endure the strict training. Natsume had once made a promise with the boy. That promise ensured that Natsume would never be truly alone.

...Okay. I'll become Natsume's shikigami.

One person living alone with magic. That was the fate of a Tsuchimikado.

But she wasn't the only one born to the Tsuchimikado. It was only because she was a Tsuchimikado that she was able to meet that boy, and that was the only reason the boy would stay by her as a shikigami.

Then, that was enough. She wouldn't object to such a lifestyle.

Even if all she had was magic, even if there was nothing around her. As long as Harutora was with her, Natsume was satisfied.

This residence seemed to have been constructed in the highland by a county road in order to be hidden in the forest.

The residence of the Tsuchimikado, the once-great Onmyoudou family.

Because of its old age, this residence here had already become part of the scenery. It definitely didn't have a gorgeous appearance, nor was it so solemn that it deterred visitors. It was old and venerable. But it gave off a difficult-to-dislike style.

An altar was set in one of the residence's twenty-odd rooms, the one called the 'Bellflower Room'.

The Bellflower Room faced one of the many courtyards. The normally completely closed sliding doors and barriers were opened wide that night.

The night air was mostly-covered in clouds, and the moon showed its face from the gaps in between. The sound of insects came from the moonlight-filled courtyard.

A man sat alone in the center of the Bellflower Room.

The Tsuchimikado family head, Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi.

His hair was already tinted white, and it was hard to see his true age from his external appearance. He wore a kimono, as always, and wore metal-framed glasses. His face gave off a knowledgeable impression, but it revealed a bit of darkness.

The lights weren't on in the room, and the Bellflower Room was even darker than the courtyard. Yasuzumi, who sat on the floor, watched the 'boards' in front of him. It was a thin tool formed by two boards. There was a rectangular board that represented the 'earth' and a round board that represented the 'sky'. This was an ancient magical tool used in divination called the Liu Ren Board.

Also, there was a tall wooden box large enough to hold a kettle next to Yasuzumi, wrapped up as if it had just been delivered. From the gaps in the packaging, it could be glimpsed that the wooden box appeared to be sealed with Japanese paper.

Yasuzumi stared motionlessly at the boards in the darkness. Only the noise of insects waxed and waned like a tide in the heavy silence of the night.

The sound of insects suddenly stopped.

At the same time, the noise of many footsteps arose. Immediately afterwards, a tense atmosphere swiftly spread.

"He's there!"

Several suit-wearing men walked into the courtyard in front of the Bellflower Room.

Right behind the speaker were dark-blue swallows flying through the air, and the shikigami charms he cast out became a giant green cat. The binding shikigami 'Swallow Whip' and 'Cat Bandage'. These men were Mystical Investigators of the Onmyou Agency.

But it wasn't just them.

"...Tsuchimikado family head Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi. We're here to arrest you."

A young female voice.

A woman walked up from the encircling Mystical Investigators. She had medium-length hair held up with a barrette, a streamlined nose, clever eyes, and wore a jacket and a tight skirt. But upon careful inspection, her upper clothing was exorcist miasma protection clothing that had been cut short for more ease of movement.

She was probably in her mid-twenties, and she was clearly younger than the Mystical Investigators behind her. But her resolute posture exhibited the special arrogance and dignity of a front-liner, without a trace of negligence or indulgence. The aura from her body was the most prominent.

But that was natural. Because she was one of the Twelve Divine generals, a National-First Class Onmyouji.

Yasuzumi slowly raised his head from the board.

His gaze passing through his glasses turned towards the courtyard whose image was cut into a square.

"......Independent Exorcist Yuge Mari....."

The woman - Yuge - lifted an eyebrow, somewhat surprised.

"You recognize me? I heard that the Tsuchimikado Family head was a recluse..... We don't want to make things troublesome for no reason either. Sorry to bother you at this time, but I hope that you can behave and come with us. Alright?"

Yuge persuaded him with respectful words.

At the same time as that businesslike opening, she stared at Yasuzumi in the darkness with a sharp gaze. The Mystical Investigators behind her had long since taken battle-ready stances.

But Yasuzumi didn't move a muscle.

"Could you tell me your reasons?"

He briefly asked back with a calm voice, beautifully controlling his emotions.

"Unfortunately, I don't know the circumstances either. However....."

Yuge looked at the wooden box next to Yasuzumi.

".....Though I don't know what's inside that, it looks like you know better than me from the fact that you especially prepared it, right?"

"....."

Yasuzumi didn't reply to Yuge's question.

Yuge waited a moment, then nodded as if checking with herself.

"How about it? If you have a clear conscience, please cooperate with us. Moreover..... To be honest, I myself can't understand our mission this time. If possible, I hope to hear an explanation from you."

"Independent Officer."

"What is it? Don't you have the same questions?"

Yuge leisurely looked back and asked the restless Mystical Investigators.

"Why would anyone want an Independent Exorcist to leave her original post and lead a team of Mystical Investigators out of Tokyo to arrest a member of a once prominent Onmyoudou house? Though I shouldn't look for faults in this mission, it's hard not to feel suspicious."

The Mystical Investigators also looked unhappy upon hearing Yuge's indifferent words. Just as Yuge said, they hadn't been told the reasons for arresting Yasuzumi. Although the Mystical Investigators hadn't even been informed of the objective of their mission before arriving at the scene, deliberately exposing their discontent to

the target they were trying to arrest violated the traditional methods of the Mystical Investigators.

Of course, they couldn't force the exorcist Yuge to comply with the Mystical Investigator's operational methods either.

"......Honestly, that useless guy, what exactly is he planning....."

She complained quietly in a voice no one could hear.

But the miscellaneous affairs ended here. She immediately took up a stance, looking at Yasuzumi again.

"In any case, our requests are as I stated. Your answer?"

Yasuzumi's reply was curt, with no plans of beating around the bush.

"I refuse."

Yuge inadvertently tensed as if feeling annoyed. But at the same time, the Mystical Investigators acted together in concert without Yuge's instructions. It was Yuge who panicked instead of Yasuzumi, but the Mystical Investigators didn't pay her any heed, directing all of the 'Swallow Whips' stopped in the air to rush towards the Bellflower Room.

But at that moment.

"Oh my. How bold, to try stepping into the Tsuchimikado house while wearing those shoes."

Something flashed out and Yuge simultaneously erected a barrier.

A jagged trail of light left the dark room. The dozen 'Swallow Whips' that flew over were instantly incinerated and became dust that dropped onto the veranda.

"...Retreat."

Yuge quickly gave the Mystical Investigators an order. Her indifferent gaze sharpened by several degrees. The Mystical Investigators instantly drew back. Yuge spread the barrier, covering all of the members inside it.

Immediately afterwards, a charm that came from who knew where flew out from the Bellflower Room as if it had waited for them to finish those actions.

The charm exploded and released a beam of light.

Flash.

Along with the sound of the air being scorched, yellow lightning pummeled Yuge's barrier. The violent impact made Yuge's expression turn serious.

"......No one is to step out from my barrier. You will die."

Following Yuge's command, several more charms came flying at them.

A sequence of flashes.

Sharp, slender lightning bolts leaped through the air as if to shatter the silence from before. Multiple lines of light became whips to pummel Yuge's barrier. Forked lightning incinerated all the 'Cat Bandages' that were still outside the barrier.

A deafening roar and a blinding flash. The Mystical Investigators shouted but it was hard to hear them clearly. The lightning strikes seemed to be completely automatic but didn't harm the residence a single bit. It was common knowledge that magic that controlled 'lightning' was extremely difficult, but this practitioner's control was flawless.

"....."

Yuge motionlessly maintained the barrier.

Not long afterwards, the lighting assault abruptly ceased. Though they endured the attack, their five senses were overwhelmed. Yuge tightened her lips, glaring at the Bellflower Room but unable to release the barrier.

"...Oh my, how incredible. I was trying not to break the barrier, but I didn't think it wouldn't budge an inch. You're quite outstanding."

The same voice as from before, with a calm tone unsuited to the atmosphere.

Yasuzumi was still sitting stationary in the center of the Bellflower Room. But at some point, a woman had arrived next to him. She had a hand on her hip and a happy smile.

The woman wasn't tall and she looked to be about forty years of age, but she seemed vibrant, like the image of an athletic girl after many years. She had a headband on her forehead and wore - unexpectedly - miasma protection clothing. They were quite out-of-date and there was a lightning emblem on the chest that she seemed to have sewn on by herself.

With an indifferent tone, Yasuzumi said:

"She's a National First-Class Onmyouji. You've heard of the title 'Binding Princess' before?"

"Eh? This is the 'Binding Princess'? A barrier user? I see, so it's you. So you were a Divine General."

The woman nodded in admiration with a 'no wonder' attitude. Yuge didn't relax, staring at the two who seemed to know each other.

".....Who are you?"

"Uhuhu. I'm your senpai. Though it's a bit embarrassing..... You've heard of the 'Akihabara Ram', right?"

"......No."

"Huh? Really? How strange. Then, what about the 'Exorcist's Heavenly Belle'? Or 'Lady Thunder of the Flash'?"

"......It's my first time hearing those."

"I, I see..... Well, there's no helping it. You're still too young. I've been inactive for fifteen years, so it's reasonable that you had no opportunity to hear about me."

The woman consoled herself, seeming depressed. Immediately afterwards, the eyes of an older Mystical Investigator behind Yuge suddenly widened.

"I remember! That magic just now - that woman's the 'Human Power Generator'!"

"Ah."

"...Eh, huh? Hold on! Why do you only remember that insulting nickname? Who was it? Who did you hear that from?"

The red-faced woman shouted very angrily. But it was actually only coincidence that Yuge knew this nickname. Her former boss had mentioned that there was once a female team captain of a spiritual disaster purification team who was good at lightning magic. Although she never obtained 'First-Class Onmyou' qualifications, her skills - though her boss at the time had used 'destructive power' to express it - could be ranked among the top five of all exorcists.

But the current problem wasn't her history. Rather, why was such a powerful former exorcist with Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi?

Yuge didn't turn back, quietly asking a question of the Mystical Investigator behind her.

"......Have you gotten in contact with the other team that circled around to the other side of the residence?"

"No."

"I see....."

Ending the conversation, Yuge thought for a moment. Then, she straightened her back and slowly walked forward.

She walked outside of the barrier she had put up. The Mystical Investigators panicked, quietly gulping as they saw Yuge's aura rapidly converge.

On the other hand, the woman in the Bellflower Room blinked.

"Oh my. Are you planning on fighting me head-on? You're a barrier user, right? Is it really alright to walk out of the barrier you barely managed to cast?"

".....I'm arresting you two in the name of the Onmyou Agency."

Yuge didn't reply to the woman, making a one-sided proclamation.

In a calm and businesslike tone,

"Resistance is useless. Please obediently accept your arrest."

"Well."

The woman smirked slightly, helplessness seeming to be written on her face.

"I've already made it clear beforehand, so I won't hold back anymore."

The woman became angry, taking out a charm to deter the other party. But Yuge was unfazed, so the woman pouted angrily.

"You asked for it!"

The woman shouted and refined her magical energy. However much of her true ability she was using, this magical energy was strong enough to make an active

exorcist speechless. "Hah!" With that sound, she threw the charm from her hand into the air.

In that moment, Yuge said in a split second:

"...Akada of the east, Shutakou of the west, Satteiro of the south, and Sodamani of the north--"

She chanted an incantation, and then the woman's charm magic exploded.

"Order!"

The woman used a wood-element charm, but it was a wood-element charm of her own original creation. A sudden flash emerged and they were assaulted by a roar. Lightning became a whip that swung straight at Yuge.

But it was the ground on Yuge's left and right that exploded with a giant roar. The lightning that lingered in her vision had drawn out an arc towards Yuge, but it had suddenly twisted weakly before reaching her and changed its trajectory. As if the lightning had deliberately avoided her.

Actually, the lighting the woman had released had indeed 'avoided' Yuge. The incantation Yuge had chanted just now was a 'lighting-repelling' magic from Imperial Onmyoudou. Though it wasn't a high-difficulty magic, it wasn't very applicable, so it hadn't been brought to General Onmyoudou. The woman, whose weak point had been seized, gritted her teeth.

"A youngster like you using such an ancient move - let me tell you, you can't defend against my attack with that level of 'lightning-repelling'!"

Those words definitely weren't conceding defeat. It had already been fifteen years since she left active duty, but she was still a legendary lightning user. Taking that into consideration, she probably had other methods to combat her special magic.

But Yuge had the same thoughts.

"On bishibishi karakara shibari sowaka!"

The Unmoving Golden Chains magic. Not only could this kind of magic be used to deal with practitioners, exorcists often used it to deal with spiritual disasters as well. Yuge didn't form hand seals for this magic, it was an Unmoving Golden Chains with just a brief incantation. But the magic released scattered in midair like a shotgun, attacking the Bellflower Room like a rain of arrows.

"Eh?" Next to the surprised woman, the previously motionless Yasuzumi tapped the ground with his fingertip. Suddenly, the emergency barrier set in the Bellflower Room activated and deflected the assaulting magic into the corridor.

"What was that just now? The magic shattered - n-no, it split?"

The woman widened her eyes and stared. Yasuzumi also watched Yuge motionlessly through the barrier.

The barrier Yasuzumi had activated was a seal of ancient Tsuchimikado heritage that used spiritual power to protect the residence's Bellflower Room altar. This magic abided by ancient regulations different from General Onmyoudou, and was several times stronger than barriers set in exorcist training rooms.

"On bishibishi karakara shibari sowaka!"

She chanted the same incantation again. The Unmoving Golden Chains she released split again and flew towards the barrier Yasuzumi had put up.

This time, it wasn't deflected by the barrier. Rather, it passed through.

"Eh?"

"....."

The finely-split magic captured Yasuzumi and the woman in succession. Though this magic wasn't the strongest of Unmoving Golden Chains, it still had the function of its original magic after splitting many times. It was Yuge's original creation.

But the most frightening element wasn't the splitting step.

"Wh-Why? Yasuzumi-san, did you release the barrier?"

"......It seems that she 'saw through' the magic and grasped its structure. The barrier wasn't destroyed, it was rendered ineffective."

"'Saw through'? ...Just now? It was ineffective right after she saw it? Isn't the barrier here the pride of the Tsuchimikado?"

The woman was in a great panic. She had trouble moving, as her body was already seized by the Unmoving Golden Chains.

In a calm tone, Yuge said:

"Just as you said, I'm a 'barrier-user', a specialist in that field. Now, why don't you come too, 'Human Power Generator'."

Only when Yuge spoke and walked towards the residence did the woman realize that she had come across a worthy opponent. Even though she knew that her opponent was a Divine General, she had gotten careless because of her age.

"......There's no helping it."

She muttered those words and then revealed an expression more serious than before.

"Yasuzumi-san, I'm breaking through."

"Please be gentle."

In the next moment, light surpassing the lighting from before erupted from the woman's entire body.

An explosion sounded as if the air was boiling. Yuge unconsciously put up a barrier, which repeatedly shook under the shockwave.

"...Ah."

She frantically opened her closed eyes and stared ahead. Countless sparks and flashes of electricity burst from the miasma protection clothing on the woman's body like decorations. Electricity came from her body, blasting away the golden chains constricting her. She had never seen this kind of magic before.

"Yasuzumi-san, the barrier!"

"It's released."

The woman's lightning seemed to have simultaneously released the golden chains of Yasuzumi next to her. Yasuzumi tapped the ground with his fingertip again, releasing the Bellflower Room's barrier. The woman reached out her right arm.

She released lightning with a rumble, and electricity assaulted Yuge in a torrent. Yuga rapidly strengthened her barrier, but the lightning that the woman released far surpassed her charm magic from before, forcing Yuge back along with the barrier that protected her.

"Ah!"

Yuge instantly changed the 'nature' of her barrier. From a pure defensive wall, it turned into a magic used to scatter magical energy and weaken its might.

Just then,

"Hah! Yah!"

The woman constantly released electricity. The shocking amount of light was almost blinding. Loud rumbles deafened her ears and the shockwaves made her skin tremble.

Yuge focused her mind under this violent pressure, 'seeing' the enemy.

"This is..... a shikigami?"

"Correct!"

The woman replied politely.

A shikigami, probably a defensive shikigami. It wasn't materialized. No, it was a type that could be used without materializing, probably a manmade type. It was an avatar of the practitioner that strengthened several types of magic as per the master's instructions - a special shikigami that acted as an 'extra hand'.

"Ohoho~ You asked for it, girl!"

The woman formed a hand seal. A seal of Taishakuten. Taishakuten was also recognized as the God of War Indra in the Hindu religion. Indra was the lord of heaven, and was a god who could manipulate thunder and lightning at will. His weapon was a vajra, which symbolized thunder.

"Noumaku sanmanda botanan indoraya sowaka!"

The magical energy steadily swelled along with her mantra, and electricity poured forth with the force of a bursting dam. Intense thunder rumbled and lightning billowed angrily. The woman's magic struck Yuge's barrier head-on, slowly incinerating it. The shockwaves even destroyed the veranda of the residence.

A lightning storm she had never experienced before.

But,

"Don't look down on me!"

Yuge shouted. At the same time, the barrier protecting Yuge deformed and folded on itself. Also, multiple barriers spread around the one that changed form. It endured the lightning, giving off rainbow-colored light.

She constructed a complex barrier, taking into calculation their positions, the occasion, and the magic. This wasn't a complete, traditional defensive barrier, and its abnormal form could be assessed as a 'lightning rod' she had put up against her opponent. It continuously absorbed and sealed the lightning that the woman released. "Huh?" The woman's eyes widened.

Yuge formed a hand seal again and reached towards the night sky. The magical energy that was released into the distance covered the area in moments. The entire courtyard, no, the entire residence was sealed with a barrier.

"It seems that I've let you get carried away..... But it ends here!"

Yuge pointed her index and middle fingers, forming a blade seal "Ouch." The woman moaned, and then panicked, noticing that her body could no longer move.

"Huh? Hey - what's going on? A barrier?"

The woman lowered her head to look at her own body and was taken aback.

Prismatic barriers like big glass blocks had locked the woman's body and limbs like shackles. The areas that the barrier covered had all stopped moving.

She was bound firmly in midair by several tough barriers. Yasuzumi who sat next to her was also trapped in his initial posture, unable to move.

The woman frantically released lightning, but unlike the Unmoving Golden Chains, Yuge's barriers didn't budge. Moreover, most of the lightning she released was naturally absorbed by the 'lightning rod'.

Yuge hmphed lightly towards the speechless woman.

"......It's no use. You can't break that barrier with your strength. The entire residence has been sealed off. As I said before..... 'it ends here'."

Yuge announced coldly as she fixed the hair that had been blown into a mess.

She was young but was a Divine General and even an Independent Exorcist. She usually preferred the gentle approach, but her strength was overwhelming. There were few Onmyouji who could oppose an angry Yuge.

Slowly, Yasuzumi said:

"......As expected, it's tough to fight a National First-Class Onmyouji head-on."

"Then you help too! Don't just sit there!"

The motionless woman was still struggling to resist.

But,

"There's no need for me. My shikigami is sufficient for this situation."

Just as Yasuzumi replied leisurely:

"My, my. Just like Chizuru says, you should do something too, Yasuzumi."

That voice came from behind Yuge. Yuge looked back, stunned. Though the Mystical Investigators had stayed inside the barrier, they had all collapsed.

In their place stood a man wearing samue. The first impression he gave off was of a wrestler, as he was well-built with a sturdy physique. He was very tall but wasn't very intimidating. His hair was tied up with a cloth and he had a thin beard under his chin.

The man faced Yasuzumi and smiled slightly.

"The guys who circled around behind are also asleep for now. But, well, Mystical Investigators are really indiscreet recently. I don't know what that old man Amami is doing."

The man spoke with a calm tone.

In addition, the man's aura wasn't visibly disrupted. Though Yuge's attention had been focused on the magic battle just now, he had still knocked out an entire team of Mystical Investigators without her noticing, and was remaining calm and composed. Quite impressive.

"Who--!"

Are you. Before Yuge asked that, the shackled woman said:

"Dear!"

She called out loudly. "D-Dear?" Yuge reflexively looked back at the woman.

The man raised a hand towards the woman who greeted him.

"Sorry, sorry, I'm late. .....But, it's really been a long time since you wore that. It really suits you, huh?"

"Hmph. I wore this during active duty, so I didn’t want to discard it."

"Really. I'm impressed, dear. How about we send Harutora a photograph this time?"

"Oh, come on, dear. We have to keep it a secret from that boy, right?"

The two of them suddenly chatted about their family matters, causing Yuge to give them a disdainful look.

Yasuzumi coughed lightly, still motionless.

"Takahiro, fend this woman off first."

"Nn, right."

After nodding good-naturedly, the man looked at Yuge again, quickly walking over as if to greet a friend.

Of course, Yuge wouldn't permit him to get however close he wanted. She immediately formed a blade seal and spread the barrier that had sealed Yasuzumi towards him as well. Prismatic barriers appeared, sealing the man's body and limbs.

But it was ineffective.

The man easily passed through the barriers that Yuge had fixed in midair.

"Ah?"

How was that possible? Yuge forced down her shock, constantly putting up similar barriers. She used all her power to fill the space between her and the man with barriers. But the man kept effortlessly advancing. The stunned Yuge unconsciously put her hands together again and formed a hand seal, fluidly moving from a dharmacakra seal to a magic binding seal. This was the Unmoving Golden Chains magic.

But,

"Too late."

The man reached out an arm.

Magical energy shot out from the seal formed by the man's fingers. She couldn't determine what magic it was, but the magic she was trying to weave encountered interference and was disrupted. Yuge swiftly retreated and simultaneously focused, refining magical energy.

"On bishibishi karakara shibari sowaka!"

Along with a powerful shout, she cleared away the man's interference and released Unmoving Golden Chains. But the moment the magical ropes caught the man, the man's figure suddenly vanished along with a light lag.

"What, a shikigami!?"

It had been a simple shikigami. The shikigami charm that remained fluttered down gently as if mocking her. Where was the practitioner? Before she had the time to 'see' the surroundings:

"Alright, you can move now."

A voice came from the Bellflower Room. It seemed that while Yuge was preoccupied, he had freed the woman and Yasuzumi from the barriers fixed in midair.

"Ah."

The man had probably been in the room since the beginning. A simple shikigami could break through the barriers fixed in midair by simply dematerializing. The interference towards her magic just now hadn't been to stop the Unmoving Golden Chains, it had been to 'loosen' the already completely-formed barriers.

"......Who are you?"

Yuge restrained her urge to yell and questioned the man. After he looked at the woman and Yasuzumi with a 'you still haven't explained' expression, he showed Yuge a fearless smile again.

"We're something like the 'guardians' of the Tsuchimikado family. I'm Tsuchimikado Takahiro and she's Tsuchimikado Chizuru. You'd understand if I said we were the Tsuchimikado branch family, right?"

"Branch family.....?'

Yuge had an understanding expression, as if aware of the Tsuchimikado branch family's business.

She glared at the two with a stern expression.

".....The former female team captain of a spiritual disaster purification team..... and you..... A former Mystical Investigator?"

"I don't do that anymore, I'm just a countryside Onmyou doctor."

The man - Takahiro - shrugged his shoulders, affirming Yuge's question. Yuge's eyes became sharper and sharper.

Needless to say, Yuge was a first-rate exorcist. Her skills at purifying spiritual disasters were at the top of the nation.

But as for magic against humans, although she wouldn't lose to a normal Mystical Investigator, it was unfortunately difficult to call her first-rate. Even Yuge knew this herself. It would be fine if they used a strong type of shikigami, but magic against humans was not her specialty. The shortcoming of practitioners who manipulated strong barriers wasn't their own barriers being destroyed, but rather the practitioner themselves being 'misdirected'. If Yuge herself was trapped in the enemy's magic, her barriers would be useless.

"....."

Yuge slowly formed a seal.

She narrowed her eyes and slowed her breathing. The Sanskrit character 'अ' appeared in her head, swiftly uniting her mind. She let the aura in her body cycle intensely. This was a meditation method of esoteric Buddhism, Ajikan Meditation. She

cleansed the aura inside her body, clearing away any effects of the magical interference and any magical traps that might have been placed.

Then, she formed a fire seal, a wisdom seal, and a disruption seal.

"On kirikiri unhatta!"

This was a barrier protection method, one of Acala's magics like Unmoving Golden Chains. In the end, Yuge's best countermeasure was still a barrier, even in a fight against a highly skilled Mystical Investigator. Yuge designated the target as herself, putting up a formidable barrier and completely obstructing anything that could affect her magical energy and spiritual power.

But,

"Oh my, you won't be able to catch us by hiding like a tortoise, right?"

Just like Chizuru said, this barrier would also completely block any magic she released while inside. In other words, Yuge couldn't attack.....

".....I said before, my barrier completely sealed off this residence. You can't escape either."

"Is that so, dear?"

"There should still be room to try, dear. Try using something stronger."

Hearing what Takahiro said, Chizuru nodded in high spirits.

She came to the courtyard with Takahiro, forming a seal Yuge had never seen before and chanting an incantation she had never heard before. It was Imperial Onmyoudou magic. Yuge tensed up.

Chizuru chanted the incantation single-mindedly, and fine electricity flowed through her body - and on the surface of the old miasma protection clothing - again. The magical energy was constantly refined and Chizuru's spiritual pressure rose.

Then,

"Thunder, fill the sky for nine days!"

Thunder roared.

Chizuru extended her arm, pointing into the sky. Magical energy instantly flew into the sky--

Lightning struck as if the god of lightning had slammed down his hammer.

The impact shook the earth and the blast shattered the sky. Light and darkness inverted and her five senses were momentarily cut off.

"Hah~ The barrier looks simple, but it's very solid. I couldn't even break it by using my trump card."

Chizuru, who 'looked' above her head with an open mouth expressed her feelings in a surprised tone of voice. Takahiro next to her seemed to feel deep admiration.

"But with this, we'll succeed as long as I keep striking the weak spots with your lightning, dear. ...Yasuzumi, looks like your 'preparations' were unnecessary."

Yuge angrily gritted her teeth upon hearing Takahiro's words.

But his prediction was correct. Just as Chizuru said, the barrier sealing the residence had been completed in haste, and it was just a simple, insufficiently strong magic. If Takahiro used his skills to keep hitting with Chizuru's lightning magic, it was very likely to break.

What should she do? Yuge thought with all her power.

The three of them might escape if this went on. But it was very dangerous for Yuge to release her barrier protection and fight them directly. Takahiro had probably deliberately asked Chizuru to use her trump card to shake Yuge up. Wouldn't she be easily tricked?

"....."

Sweat trickled down Yuge's forehead.

But before Yuge could make a decision, the battle changed again.

".....No."

Yasuzumi, whose gaze had returned to the board again at some point, slowly rose.

"As expected, it's 'far from good'. Kurahashi seems to be serious too."

"What?"

Takahiro asked Yasuzumi.

Then.

"Oh, you're almost finished. As expected, the Tsuchimikado crowd is too much of a burden for one person alone."

A new intruder strolled into the courtyard.

He was a small, middle-aged man who gave off an atmosphere of both unhappiness and kindness. A beard covered his mouth and chin, and his face, tensed like an actor, revealed a faint bitter smile.

Chizuru was taken aback.

"Tch, Miyachi!"

"Hey, hey, Tsuchimikado. Don't use a tone like 'Tch' with your former coworker."

The director of the Exorcist Bureau Command Room, Miyachi Iwao, whose authority and power were above all of the exorcists. He had given command of the mission to Yuge prior and waited downhill of the residence.

Apologetically, Yuge said:

"Director! Sorry, I ended up bothering you....."

"Ah, no problem, no problem. I thought it would end up this way. You worked hard, Maririn."

"I am deeply ashamed. ...But please stop calling me Maririn."

Miyachi replied lightly, but Yuge glared at him angrily. Her stupid boss laughed and looked towards the Bellflower Room.

"It's been a long time, you three. It's so much like old times that even I'm surprised."

In response to Miyachi's familiar tone, Yasuzumi was unresponsive, Takahiro tensed up, and Chizuru frowned even more unhappily, hiding behind her husband. "You guys....." Miyachi protested, as if hurt.

"Even if you're just acting, can we at least share some nostalgia? What's up with those disgusted expressions?"

"Shut up! Stupid Miyachi, can you not use such fake words of familiarity?"

"You're the one using hurtful words. Don't say things like Stupid Miyachi."

"Don't argue with me! Also, why did you only show up now! You're an eyesore, go away! Or just quietly let us go!"

"That's pretty tough on me. But you're as lively as ever."

Miyachi's bearded face twisted into a bitter smile.

But unlike his easy-going attitude, the moment Miyachi appeared, the advantage turned to their side. Ignoring his subordinate Yuge, Yasuzumi, Takahiro and the sharp-tongued Chizuru all focused their attention on Miyachi as if watching the grand finale.

Actually, Miyachi often appeared in the 'finale' of magic battles. In many situations, he single-handedly changed the tide of battle.

"......Miyachi."

Takahiro called out with a tense voice.

"Are you..... alright with this?"

That brief question held deep meaning. Miyachi briefly showed a confused look of not knowing how to respond.

Then, he relaxed his shoulders and sadly shook his head.

"Well, it's not too bad, right? Someone like me has to listen to the Chief's orders."

"......'Someone like me', huh. After we haven't seen you for a while, you've become very dignified."

"Really? I'm quite sorry."

Yasuzumi turned to Takahiro after seeing his reaction, and solemnly spoke.

"......Takahiro."

"Ah, I haven't felt this feeling of walking a tightrope in a long time. Well....."

Takahiro smiled wryly. It was somewhat of a scary smile. Chizuru's expression also tightened after hearing her husband's words. Miyachi stroked his beard with a finger, watching the reactions of the three.

At the same time, he turned to Yuge and instructed her.

"Then, Maririn. Can you help me out and strengthen the surrounding barrier as much as possible? I'd feel really sorry for the neighbors if this turned into a wildfire."

Late at night.

The lights were still on in the executive office of the Onmyou Agency building. The person who sat at the heavy desk was Kurahashi Genji, the Onmyou Agency Chief as well as the Chief of the Exorcist Bureau, the most important person in the modern magic world. The iron-like impression he gave off never faltered. The severity he still gave off in silence highlighted his presence even more than his title.

Kurahashi was still seriously dealing with his business.

The ring of a phone call broke the silence.

"...Sorry for the wait. We have the 'Raven's Wing'."

Kurahashi nodded heavily upon hearing the report that came over the phone. Then, he hung up the phone, calmly returning to his work without revealing any particular emotion.

Part 2

"Kyouko-dono, you're not looking too well today."

"Yeah. Is something bothering you? Do you want to talk with us?"

It was the morning following the day the Onmyou Academy reopened. Kyouko was greeted at the entrance of the Onmyou Academy. It was the komainu shikigami sitting on the left and right of the automatic doors, Alpha and Omega.

The two often noted the students' appearances and conversations, and could be called quite emphatic. Actually, Kyouko was indeed looking poorly today, but she just smiled weakly with a 'thank you", walking past the shikigami without stopping.

After entering, she sighed deeply.

...No good. I'm still flustered.

Unable to make herself calm down, she pushed the buttons of the elevator. But the image she had seen on the news this morning reappeared in Kyouko's mind, making her effort useless.

...'Fire spotted early in the morning.....'

She had doubted her ears at the start and then doubted her eyes afterwards.

News of a fire suddenly came as she got up. The Tsuchimikado family residence had been burned. That was a trove full of recollections where she had once confessed to Harutora, as well as Natsume's home.

...Why was a fire there.....

In any case, it was the residence of the famous Tsuchimikado family, so it couldn't possibly have had no fire countermeasures prepared. Also, there should have been a barrier set up too for protection against criminals and other purposes, along with several resident shikigami. Maybe a small fire was possible if worst came to worst,

but it was obviously impossible for a fire to burn such a vast residence without even triggering any magic. What exactly had happened?

She also didn't know whether it was fortunate or unfortunate that Natsume's father hadn't been present. Though he hadn't been caught up in the fire, he probably would have used magic to extinguish the fire if he had been home.

...But, the news said that there had been no contact with him..... Could he have gotten caught up in something else?

She didn't understand. Anyway, there was too little information. Kyouko's grandmother, Principal Kurahashi, had left already, probably due to today's morning news. All Kyouko could do now was patiently wait for the subsequent reports.

No, there was something else she could do.

...Natsume.....

Natsume should have heard of today's morning news. After all, the fire had started in her old home, and she was undoubtedly shocked. Not only Natsume, but also Harutora should be the same.

"....."

The attitude she had taken towards Natsume yesterday and her talk with Harutora reappeared in Kyouko's mind. Also, there was the conversation with Suzuka yesterday after school and her verbal commitment at the end.

That had been yesterday at this time. Honestly, she hadn't even organized her own feelings yet.

But,

...Get a grip, Kurahashi Kyouko!

Right now wasn't a time to wallow in her own emotions. Natsume and Harutora must be feeling worse - they had it the hardest. For now, she should put her own troubles aside and at least help do something for them.

Of course, she couldn't help Natsume and Harutora with much right now. But she hoped that at least she could cheer for them on the side. She hoped she could speak properly with them, face-to-face. With that, Natsume and Harutora would definitely feel happier. She should be able to bring them a lot of comfort.

"......Alright."

Right now wasn't the time to talk about things like gloom and anxiety. It was hard to understand, and she wouldn't be able to resolve the problem no matter how long she puzzled over it. She might as well just think of Natsume right now. He - no, she - was definitely tormented by the news, so Kyouko definitely had to support her.

She didn't want to abandon Natsume in this kind of situation. She didn't want to pretend she didn't know her classmate, especially a good friend she had been in danger with and with whom she had experienced several crises together. She wasn't faking her emotions, nor was she trying to pretend to be a good person. Kyouko truly believed so. If she could imagine it, then there was no problem. She could definitely do it.

Kyouko hardened her resolve, slightly hastening her strides as she walked towards the classroom. Natsume and the others had probably already arrived in the classroom. She was so nervous. But Kyouko endured those feelings of tension.

Kyouko walked wordlessly into the corridor where students shuffled back and forth.

But, her gaze was suddenly attracted by something along the way.

Before she was conscious of it, her gaze inadvertently caught up to 'that'. It wasn't just Kyouko. The other students also inadvertently looked over.

An unfamiliar scenery was mixed into the familiar corridor.

It was a red-haired girl who gave a strong impression.

"So? The students here should all recognize him, right? Tsuchimikado Natsume. I want to go to his classroom, could you tell me where it is?'

The girl accosted two female students in the corridor and questioned them. The girls being interrogated traded glances in confusion.

Kyouko unconsciously stopped upon hearing Natsume's name. The girl noticed that there was someone standing behind her and turned around - meeting Kyouko's gaze.

That girl she had never met wore a white Onmyou Academy female uniform; however, she wasn't a student. It would be impossible for Kyouko to not remember a student who gave off such a strong impression.

Her flowing red hair was studded with small ornaments, like serpents of flame twined around precious stones. Her stern eyes exuded and elegant and mysterious air. She might have been mistaken for a boy if she wore the jet-black uniform. The girl had androgynous facial features, but the atmosphere she gave off still held the purity and vigor of a teenager.

"Huh? Perhaps you know it? Tsuchimikado Natsume's classroom."

The girl bluntly asked the stunned Kyouko.

Her words were direct, but the girl's movements, voice, and even actions had the grace of a nation's prince, steeped with an inexplicable temperament. As if Kyouko had been engulfed by the girl's personality, she said:

"...E-Eh....."

She replied vaguely and nodded.

The girl's face suddenly brightened.

"Great! Can you guide me? I want to learn the layout of the building, but I still don't know which classroom is Natsume and Harutora's class."

Natsume, Harutora. Upon hearing the girl refer to them with such familiarity, Kyouko felt a sharp reaction in her body. Before she was conscious of it, her body had already shifted into a stance.

"Well..... Who are you?"

She asked in a somewhat defensive voice.

Then, the girl showed a naive, innocent smile, like a blooming sunflower.

"Right, nice to meet you. I'm Souma Takiko. I came to observe the Onmyou Academy classes today."

Kurahashi Genji entered the Onmyou Agency building after ten in the morning.

Yesterday night, he had stayed in the agency working until two. After he returned home, he rested only for a few hours before returning to his workplace. But not a trace of exhaustion could be seen. To him, who was both the Onmyou Agency Chief and the Exorcist Bureau Chief, working this intensely was a common occurrence. After entering the agency building, he listened to reports from his waiting secretary while making a beeline to the executive office.

Kurahashi showed a bit of unease after he passed the secretary sitting before him, opened the inner door, and walked in.

A guest was already here.

The executive office was very roomy. The high-rise scenery surrounding the JR Akihabara station could be seen through the windows. In front, there was a desk used for his work and next to it was a sofa and tea table used to receive guests. The guest who had come sprawled on the sofa, reading a newspaper.

He saw Kurahashi enter and raised his head.

"Hey."

An indifferent greeting.

Kurahashi silently stared for a moment, sighing with still no change to his expression. Someone close to him would probably realize that this was his expression for surprise.

"......What are you here for?"

"Why are you asking that, I just came to greet you. It's been a while. Please look after me."

"You took the effort to break through the executive office barrier for this?"

"Don't speak so unpleasantly. No worries, I won't sit in the chief's chair whenever I want."

After saying that, the guest smiled with a bleary-eyed look and sank into the sofa again, looking at the newspaper he had been reading before. Kurahashi sighed loudly this time. Then, he slowly walked towards the sofa.

The person sitting on the sofa looked like a sixteen or seventeen-year-old teenager.

The teenager was slender, his black hair carefully combed and his soft white skin was incompatible with outdoor work. His features were proper, and he wore a vest over a high-class white shirt instead of a jacket. Below, he wore gray pants and leather shoes decorated with clasps. He had white gloves on his hands and a cloth resembling a tie around his neck. That outfit was classy enough already, but for some reason he also wore a monocle on his right eye, like an aristocrat from the previous century.

But judging from the teenager's attitude and actions, he indeed seemed aristocratic, although unconventional. He gave off a lax aura from his entire body and wasn't nervous at all as he relaxed on the sofa. His mouth even often curved into a faint cold smile.

But the most surprising thing about him was that an obviously underage youth was relaxing on the sofa in the executive office, and moreover his tone towards the Onmyou Agency Chief Kurahashi was familiar like an old friend's. However, Kurahashi didn't mind.

To the two of them, their attitudes towards one another weren't anything special. They were 'former' Onmyou Agency coworkers.

Kurahashi stood behind the sofa that the teenager sat on, staring at him with a look devoid of all emotion.

With an unaffected tone, he said:

".....You've become quite young."

"It's not my desire, it's just to match the princess."

"Where did the Souma family princess go?"

"She said that she wanted to meet the next heir of the Tsuchimikado family earlier no matter what. She was quite excited early this morning."

Kurahashi made a bitter face as he heard the teenager's reply. The teenager raised his head again.

"Hmm? Is there a problem? Wasn't it your plan for her to go to the Onmyou Academy and participate in the studies?"

".....The schedule hasn't been determined yet. It should have been later on."

"Really? We didn't know."

"Please be careful when acting on your own. I think I've sternly warned her before."

"The princess? Sorry. After all, the princess was incredibly happy when she heard yesterday that the 'Raven's Wing' was in our hands."

The teenager snickered and continued reading the newspaper, drawing back his neck in humor.

"But, the 'Raven's Wing' is intact although the residence was destroyed. Did Miyachi go a bit too far?'

"It wasn't Miyachi."

"Eh? Really?"

"Yeah. The opponents wouldn't make the mistake of clashing head-on with Miyachi. I heard that they set fire to the residence near the end of the magic battle and took the opportunity to flee. They used the Raven's Wing as bait, so it looks like they had prepared beforehand."

"Wow, they've really got guts.....Isn't that right, Yasuzumi? Well, we should praise his 'divining' ability."

The teenager laughed happily. Kurahashi snorted coldly, leaving the back of the sofa and walking to his desk.

The teenager was still laughing.

"Could it be that you're worried about the princess going to the Onmyou Academy? The possibility that the Tsuchimikados might contact their sons....."

"I've already placed my subordinates by Tsuchimikado Natsume and the others. If Yasuzumi and the others come in contact with him, I'll know immediately."

"Wow. Then there's no problem. Well, the princess's actions are often uncertain. Mutobe-kun's also with her right now, so it's fine~ it's fine~"

The teenager returned the newspaper, relaxedly making a guarantee. Kurahashi, sitting in the chair next to his desk, didn't say anything about this.

He just coldly looked at the teenager.

"......So? It looks like the contract with the princess succeeded."

"Me? Well, it's probably okay. Of course, it feels completely different from before, but I'm very happy myself."

"It doesn't seem like I need to ask about your personality..... Are your memories the same as before?"

"Yeah, up until I died. That's why I'm trying to make up for the gap between then and now like this."

The teenager raised the newspaper he was reading above his head as he said this. Upon closer inspection, the headline was news from last year. He was reading an old newspaper.

"Well. I got to realize part of the research results from many years first-hand..... I didn't feel anything particular when I reincarnated, probably because I'm no longer human. I really want to hear from Yakou about how it feels to reincarnate completely."

The teenager leisurely expressed his feelings. Kurahashi watched the teenager without a word.

Not long afterwards,

"......It seems that your 'strength' has also increased."

"Ah--"

The teenager turned around.

His proper, aristocratic face revealed a deep smile. In that moment, the impression that the tongue-wagging youth gave off suddenly changed. A cold, strange light flashed from deep behind the monocle from the wrong era, like the savage breath of a ferocious, ancient dragon buried deep beneath the ice--

".....I was surprised too. That's what's scary about the Souma family secrets, or does it just show how incredible that great man is..... Well, maybe it's both. But as for the latter, if even someone like me is like this, it'll be even more amazing when the princess brings back our lord. History will change because of this, no joke."

The teenager laughed secretly with a cold gaze.

Kurahashi calmly watched the teenager's attitude.

".....It won't change."

He murmured to himself.

"Not bad, the best we could have hoped for was for there to be no problems. But there's something I want to confirm - Dairenji. What should I call you from now on?"

Kurahashi asked candidly.

The teenager's - Dairenji Shidou's - strange manner from before dissipated and he sank contentedly into the sofa again.

With an indifferent tone, he said to his former coworker:

"It's fine if you call me 'Dairenji' like just now. For now, my name as a Yase Doji is 'Yashamaru'. Though it overlaps a bit with the 'Model G2', well, there's no helping it..... Incidentally, Mutobe-kun's 'Kumomaru'."

"I see. Yashamaru. And Kumomaru. Understood."

"Ah, also, because the two of us joined as replacements, our predecessors have resigned."

"What did you say?"

"There's no helping that either. After all, they already worked for more than a thousand years since the Johei Tengyo Rebellion, so they can't possibly keep going on. Souma's secrets aren't immortal. Rather, they're incredible for lasting so long."

The teenager seemed to be talking about things that didn't concern him.

But he immediately smiled evilly, looking at Kurahashi out of the corner of his eye.

"Well, Kurahashi. Let me ask, wouldn't it have been better if you didn't revive us? If you wanted to keep hold of the princess, wouldn't it have been more convenient not to have me around?"

That was quite a straightforward question. After all, the two of them stood on the same side right now. He shot provocative words - more than just pointed - at his companion.

But something of that level wouldn't faze Kurahashi at all.

"There aren't enough pieces."

His direct words were cut apart. "Ahaha, how tactless." The teenager laughed.

"But, in that case, it really was too rash to eliminate Amami-san. Never mind his position and his thoughts for now, it's hard to replace someone that capable.

Actually, the current Mystical Investigators are extremely disorganized. What a peculiar matter, the 'mysterious disappearance' of the Mystical Investigator Chief after that newsworthy arrest operation. We managed to calm it down, but that Masumi guy had it tough."

"In my opinion, that was the fault of the Souma princess."

"Eh? Ah, yeah. She was asking for trouble."

"That's why I'm worried."

"Well, it's because she's a true 'princess-sama'. Though she's not a bad kid..... I can't deny that she's a bit lacking in worldly wisdom or common sense. Well, all 'shamans' from ancient times are like that."

The teenager felt no worry, laughing irresponsibly as he flipped through the newspaper. Kurahashi stared at the teenager with an ironlike gaze. He would be shaking in his boots if he were any agency member, but the teenager was as unconcerned as if Kurahashi's gaze was a gentle breeze.

"In any case, the useless me is going to be moving actively to alleviate our problem of having insufficient manpower. Please look after me 'again' in the future, Kurahashi."

The teenager frivolously announced while casually reading the newspaper. Kurahashi silently nodded. Actually, his resourcefulness and ability would be exceedingly useful in the future.

As a piece, he was an extremely dangerous one.

But he was also a strong, indispensable piece.

Then, the teenager seemed to suddenly think of something. "Right." He looked up from the newspaper.

"I thought of it just as you said we didn't have enough pieces, Kurahashi. How did that business go after you entrusted the Mystical Investigators to 'find that person'?"

"Find that person?"

Kurahashi let out a rare voice of surprise.

"Who?"

"My subordinate when I was still in the Lingering Spirit Division. Though she's treated as 'missing', she was my right-hand-woman on Yakou research."

Kurahashi expressed interest in the teenager's explanation. "A Yakou believer?" He asked this, but the teenager denied it.

"I wanted to keep her talent around if possible. Her personality was a bit defective, but she was very capable in her areas of expertise. Incidentally, she 'knew' many things that she 'shouldn't have'."

"......Her name?"

"Saotome Suzu."

He seemed to recall something upon hearing that name. Kurahashi twitched.

"The woman who wrote the thesis on the Raven's Wing. But, she vanished before the 'Great Hinamatsuri Purification'. I don't believe there were any follow-up reports. Did the investigation also stop?"

"Ah, really? Well, if there are no obvious movements from her, then there's no problem with giving up on her either."

The teenager shrugged his shoulders after speaking carelessly, his interest returning to the newspaper again. On the other hand, Kurahashi seemed to feel interested in the teenager's words and thought for a moment.

Just then came the sound of a doorknock. "Enter," Kurahashi instructed. The secretary showed his face.

"Chief. It's about time for the meeting."

"Got it. I'll go soon."

He looked in the direction of the sofa as he responded.

The teenager had already vanished, and all that was left on the tea table was a leisurely folded newspaper. An inhuman stealth - the stealth of a 'shikigami'.

Kurahashi watched the sofa for a while. But with the urging of his secretary, he silently left the office, walking out of the room.

Part 3

"......Are you sure?"

"......Yeah. I'm sure."

Harutora replied a bit obstinately to Touji's confirmation, his voice showing strong surprise and confusion. A doubtful look also emerged on Natsume's solemn face as she sat next to Harutora.

A second-year classroom of the Onmyou Academy building.

The classroom was clamorous straight from the morning. The news that the Tsuchimikado family residence - Natsume's old home - had been burned by a fire had already reached their classmates. After her true identity had been revealed, their classmates always put up subtle barriers when they interacted with Natsume. At least Harutora and the others thought so.

But right now, the instability in the classroom wasn't because of Natsume.

The reason their classmates were being noisy was in front of Harutora and the others' gazes, standing next to the teacher by the podium.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Souma Takiko. I'm here today to observe your studies and everyone's coursework. Please look after me."

The girl on the podium cheerfully greeted the students who were curious and half-stunned.

They had met this red-haired girl on the roof one night while the academy building was being repaired. She had told them that this had once been a private school established by Yakou called the 'Yakou Academy'.

"I completely forgot because of the Meguro incident..... I didn't think she would appear this straightforwardly."

Touji murmured in incomprehension. His voice was a bit happy, and he was obviously enjoying this situation. Even Harutora didn’t think they would be reunited in such a way.

"But today's been quite the busy day since early in the morning."

Harutora felt sincere agreement as he listened to his good friend's thoughts.

...Give me a break. What exactly is going on?

Today morning. After seeing the news that Natsume's old home had been burned by a fire, Harutora and Natsume had tried to contact their parents through any means possible. But their efforts had been fruitless. It had always been difficult for Natsume to contact her father, but Harutora couldn't reach his old home's phone or his parents' phones either, and he hadn't received a reply to his message. Also, there was the message 'We're safe, don't worry' that Harutora's father had sent him today morning. Could it be that he had sent that message, predicting that they would be out of contact later?

He even considered staying at the dorm today to await contact. But then he thought that he might as well ask the principal directly about this and came to the academy building.

After Harutora and the others arrived to the academy building, they noticed that the principal was absent. Moreover, it seemed that the reason she was late was related to the morning fire. It was very unfortunate that they couldn't see her immediately, but it seemed that they would be able to hear some information from the principal. He planned on properly attending class while waiting, so he came to the familiar classroom.

That girl, Takiko, was there.

".....What kind of bad day is it today."

He practically forgot about his strength running out of control this morning. And he probably couldn't forget about the matter regarding Kyouko yesterday, but because of these incidents happening one after another, its priority had gone down.

Harutora and the others arrived at the classroom just before the beginning of class and didn't even have the opportunity to greet Kyouko. Harutora kept his attention on Takiko at the podium and simultaneously glanced at Kyouko. He couldn't see her expression because she was too far away, but as expected, she was keeping a distance around her just like yesterday - though that feeling might have just been Harutora's preconceived notions at work.

On the other hand, Takiko who was being introduced on the podium seemed to have already noticed Harutora and Natsume. She glanced over, giving an extremely affectionate smile. Harutora didn't know how to respond after she smiled at him, and for the moment forced himself to smile back.

Fortunately, Takiko didn't approach Harutora and the others in front of the students. She walked off the podium after the introduction ended and sat in the nearest empty seat.

But Takiko was eye-catching even while she was just sitting. After all, that kind of hair was flashy and very pretty. Also it wasn't hard to tell from her brief greeting just now that, while she was straightforward and open-minded, her actions had quite a disposition. Most of the students were extremely interested in this unexpected visitor.

"......She said she's here to observe our studies..... What exactly is that girl doing?"

"......Because the Onmyou Academy's coursework is very difficult, there are very few outsiders who come to observe our studies, and most go to observe the third-year coursework or practicals."

Natsume quietly responded to Harutora's question.

"If she deliberately came to this classroom, then her goal is very likely to be us rather than to observe the coursework. But I can't guess her true goal without knowing who she is."

"I guess. But for the Onmyou Academy to have accepted her observational visit, they should have cleared up her origins..... probably."

"......It would be good if that were true."

The two of them looked at Takiko who sat in front of them, secretly whispering to each other. To be honest, the contents of the curriculum didn't enter their brains at all. Even so, there were too many things they needed to worry about.

Afterwards, the coursework that they weren't even listening to in the first place was interrupted. A desk worker entered the classroom and called for Natsume.

It seemed that the police and Onmyou Agency personnel had come to ask questions. They were undoubtedly asking about the fire incident from today’s morning. In that moment, quite a bit of noise arose in the classroom.

"Natsume--"

"......It's alright."

Natsume did her best to smile at Harutora, who wanted to come with her, and left partway on her own. She calmly walked out of the room along with the worker who had come to find her.

Even though Harutora felt that his childhood friend was reliable for still showing a smile in this kind of situation, he also felt worried. Natsume - naturally - was also very hesitant inside. She had almost fainted when she saw the news. But even now,

she was still fearlessly going forth to answer the questions of the adults. It was great, but she was undoubtedly forcing herself.

...Damn. I should get a grip in a time like this.....

The only thing that consoled him was the message that his father had sent this morning. The 'We're safe' probably included Natsume's father. If not for that communication, Natsume would probably have been even more disconcerted. Though it made him mad that he had just sent a text and then left them alone, he might have his own reasons for that.

...We can only wait.

He was extremely worried. But the main family residence had already burned down, and it wouldn't be any help no matter how fretful he was now. All he could do now was prepare himself and be patient as he watched the events unfold.

Finally, the first class ended. Natsume still hadn't come back.

"Touji, I'm going over to check on her."

"Got it, I'll go too."

After break between classes began, Harutora immediately rose and Touji along with Tenma who saw him followed behind him.

But there was someone who moved even faster than Harutora. It was Takiko.

"Hey! It's been a long time since that night, Harutora."

Takiko arrived as if she had been waiting for the break between classes - or more accurately, like she couldn't wait anymore - and approached Harutora's seat. "Takiko....." Harutora replied, confused. The attention of the students in the classroom all turned to the two of them.

Takiko was unconcerned about the surrounding responses.

"I'm really happy we could meet again. A lot of things happened after that. The Meguro incident gave me a scare. But I'm very happy to hear of your great performance, you really deserve your reputation."

She smiled as she spoke. Her cheerful expression didn't conceal any of her sincere goodwill towards Harutora, making Touji and Tenma behind her inadvertently trade glances.

Her forward attitude made Harutora flinch a bit. But when she came to talk so straightforwardly with a smile, he couldn't carelessly refuse her with an 'I'm busy right now'.

"A-Ah..... Really."

He just vaguely replied.

".....Though come to think of it, I didn't think we'd meet again. You don't seem to be a student here..... Who exactly are you?"

"Eh? Come on, Didn't I say? I'm someone walking the path of Onmyoudou just like you."

Takiko happily repeated the words she had spoken before.

"Also, it wasn't a lie when I said 'student' before. Though it's true that I'm not enrolled here - in the Onmyou Academy - right now."

"Hah? How is that?"

"Well..... that's still a secret."

Takiko, raising her head to look up at Harutora, smiled deliberately.

With her white uniform contrasting with her red hair, Takiko's beautiful smile greeted his eyes. Harutora inadvertently smiled wryly, as if he had been driven to by this naive and innocent smile.

An enigmatic girl. Though her origins were unknown..... He really couldn't hate her. She was probably pretty compatible with his personality in some fundamental area.

Just then,

"Harutora."

Touji behind him urged him with a slightly sharp tone. "Ah." Harutora turned around.

"She's Souma Takiko, who I mentioned before. .....Takiko, these two are Ato Touji and Momoe Tenma. The two of them are Natsume's and my friends."

Takiko immediately smiled at the two of them after Harutora introduced them.

"Ato Touji-kun and Momoe Tenma-kun. Nice to meet you. Can I call you two Touji and Tenma? You can just call me Takiko."

".....Well, that's fine. I heard about you from Harutora and Natsume. In full 'detail'."

"Eh? About the talk that night? That's troublesome. Those were things I wasn't originally supposed to tell anyone. I hope you can keep that as much of a secret as possible."

Takiko seemed a bit unhappy, but the cheerful smile on her face still didn't disappear.

Touji's sharp eyes were constantly watching Takiko during that time. Though the provocative attitude that his gaze and words were steeped in was just like Touji's style, Harutora felt that those actions were a bit unlike his character.

But Takiko seemed to not notice Touji's attitude at all. She probably didn't consider in the first place that Touji - rather, that Harutora's friend - would take such an attitude towards her.

She met the gaze of Tenma by their side, greeting him straightforwardly with a "Please look after me". Tenma, who was never lacking in politeness, was also a bit flustered at Takiko's use of a familiar expression.

"I'm really happy to meet everyone. It's like a dream that I can come to everyone's classroom like this."

"A dream?"

"Because I was always studying magic alone before this. I'd be really happy to get along with Touji and Tenma as friends."

Takiko got embarrassed at her own words.

She sincerely spoke what she was thinking without reservation. In some sense, she was even more mature than a contemporary girl. But the actions she occasionally displayed still seemed childish. That unfathomable impression was exactly the same as when they had met before.

"Ah, right. There are two others too."

Takiko suddenly turned around.

"Actually, it was Chief Kurahashi's daughter who brought me to this classroom. She's also very close with Harutora and you all, right?"

Takiko spoke while searching for Kyouko's figure. "Uh, wait." Harutora hastily stopped her. Takiko was taken aback.

"Well..... Takiko. Harutora and Kyouko are still fighting right now. So."

Tenma simply explained on behalf of the embarrassed Harutora. "Ho." Takiko immediately understood, and then looked apologetically at Harutora.

"Sorry, I didn't know. But it would be best if you made up quickly."

"I know. There are a lot of reasons....."

Takiko was still plainspoken, even looking at Harutora after his face tensed up.

"It's no problem. Though I don't know what the reason is, you can definitely resolve it if you properly talk to each other."

She gazed straight into Harutora's eyes, cheering him on as if it were natural.

Inexplicably, he didn't even think about rebuking her for being an outsider who didn't know about it. Probably because of her sincerity, she didn't feel artificial or malicious.

She was mysterious and her identity was unclear. She took on a familiar attitude, but she was tight-lipped about the important questions.

But in any case, a deep-rooted honesty could be felt from Takiko's attitude towards Harutora and Natsume. It had been that way since the first time they met.

...This girl really is.....

Very similar. To his former close friend Hokuto. They were completely different, but they felt very similar.

"......Well."

"Hmm?"

"Takiko, you're really a strange person."

"Eh? What's that supposed to mean, that's too much."

This time, Takiko seemed to truly be shocked, and her eyes widened.

Just then, the classroom door opened. It was Natsume. It seemed that the investigation had finally finished.

Natsume gaped slightly upon seeing Harutora and the others with Takiko. On the other hand, Takiko became even happier upon seeing Natsume.

"Natsume!"

She raised her hand to greet Natsume. Harutora shrugged his shoulder with a difficult expression upon seeing his childhood friend's hesitant appearance.

Natsume helplessly walked next to Harutora and the others. "It's been a while." Natsume faced the happily smiling Takiko and cautiously responded with a "Yeah."

Harutora leaned towards Natsume.

"How was it?"

He quietly whispered. Natsume shook her head, looking gloomy.

"......There's no new information. Instead, they asked me if I knew anything."

"The police and the Onmyou Agency don't know the reason for the fire or anything about your father?"

"Pretty much. The principal wasn't there either, so it looks like the principal might be clueless too....."

The voice Natsume replied in was steeped in exhaustion, and she couldn't hide her depressed feelings.

At the same time,

"Fire?"

Takiko mumbled in surprise.

"A fire - could you be talking about Natsume's - the Tsuchimikado main family?"

"What, you didn't know? It was broadcast on the news this morning."

Touji spoke, still maintaining his probing expression. It seemed that Takiko truly didn't know about this, and her appearance as she stood frozen surprised Harutora and the others.

"......Could it be..... Then, what they meant by 'got it' was....."

Takiko's face paled. Harutora and the others watched Takiko in surprise and curiosity.

"......What's wrong?"

She seemed to be distracted by other things and didn't reply to Touji's question.

"Sorry, Natsume, Harutora. I'm going to go confirm something, I'll come back soon."

She turned on her feet after leaving those words behind, then leaving the room alone as if substituting for Natsume. The next class was about to start soon.

Harutora and the others looked at each other after they were left behind.

"......What's wrong with her?"

The sound of the bell announcing the start of classes rang out in that moment.

She said she would come back soon, but Takiko still hadn't returned to the classroom when lunchtime began.

Harutora and the others headed to the cafeteria like always to eat lunch. Tenma, who usually brought his own bento, was coming to the cafeteria with Harutora and the others today, and they had met up with the first-year Suzuka somewhere too.

Suzuka seemed to have no interest in Takiko's sudden emergence.

"In the end, you still don't know who she is? What are you guys even doing?"

At the same time as she insulted them, she rudely cast them a scornful look. They were very curious about that girl but hadn't heard any substantial information, so they indeed should have felt ashamed.

Once they saw Takiko, they would be pulled into her rhythm with no way to defy her.

"......Well, she's like a tomboy princess who disguised herself to go play around in the countryside. I can't describe it simply, but she's somewhat disconnected from the world."

Though those were Touji's personal feelings, that was indeed the right metaphor for it. Especially how she kept a distance from others. It felt understandable if he expressed it like the interaction between a 'princess' and 'commoners'.

"Maybe she's somehow the princess of some traditional magic family. In that case, it's understandable that she came to participate in the Onmyou Academy's studies. If she's very familiar with Tsuchimikados because of sympathy as another traditional family....."

"But she even knows about the altar on the academy building roof. That's hard to explain with the traditional family story."

"True."

Touji also agreed with Natsume's rebuttal.

Anyway, Takiko wouldn't harm Natsume or the others. Rather, she was taking the initiative to construct a friendly relationship. They indeed had misgivings about forcefully questioning that kind of person, but it was hard not to be interested.

...How vexing.

He felt like he could trust Takiko herself when he saw her, but her background was indeed very mysterious. When he recalled the time of the similarly enigmatic girl Hokuto, the best thing to do was to hold on to the attitude 'Takiko is Takiko' while interacting with her.....

"Also....."

Suzuka surveyed Harutora's group, who were all thinking, and hmphed deliberately and disapprovingly.

"It's fine to be concerned about that Takiko, but before that, isn't there someone you need to be more concerned about? What are you doing about Kyouko?"

Suzuka revealed a bit of impatience, looking at Harutora angrily. Harutora was taken aback. Come to think of it, yesterday they had asked Suzuka to go find Kyouko but hadn't heard about the final outcome.

...Idiot. Right, I was so preoccupied before..... I'm really such a hothead.....

Harutora didn't respond to Suzuka's reproachful gaze in any way. Tenma consoled Suzuka from the side.

"Harutora and Natsume, you've been suffering since the morning today. There's nothing you can do about having a lot of things crammed into your head."

"Hah? What do you mean about suffering since the morning?"

"Eh? You didn't know about the fire?"

"Fire?"

Suzuka raised an eyebrow. "You didn't know either?" Touji asked, stunned. Suzuka pretended to be an idol in her class just like always, and she wouldn't trade information with her classmates. She definitely wouldn't know of it if she hadn't seen the morning news.

Tenma briefly informed her of the fire business.

"What? That's big news!"

She stopped her eating motions, stunned.

"......Eh? Is that true? ......Natsume, are you alright?"

"......Thanks. My father is probably safe for the moment....."

Natsume's withdrawn expression was extremely weak. Not even Suzuka continued speaking, falling silent with a bitter face.

"Well, but, it's like Suzuka said. I have to properly talk with Kyouko again."

Harutora urged himself on again.

He glanced at Natsume and she also nodded approval. If he pushed this back using the current problem as an excuse, it would just make him regret in the end.

"......Come to think of it, the principal isn't here today. Then isn't Kyouko eating alone right now?"

Harutora unconsciously gasped upon hearing the question Touji pointed out. He had forgotten about the fact that Kyouko always ate lunch with the principal.

"Y-Yeah, well....."

Lunchtime was a great opportunity to talk. He couldn't help but feel deterred by the fact that he was about to go try resolving the problem, but running away would be no help.

"Natsume, I'm going to go look for Kyouko."

"Then, I'll....."

"No, sorry, let me go by myself first. Please."

There was the incident from his childhood and his promise to mediate with Natsume, many things that would be difficult to talk about. Kyouko would also feel more restrained if Natsume was there. Natsume showed an unconvinced reaction, but Harutora firmly left his seat alone.

But,

"Wait, Harutora-kun....."

Tenma noticed the figure approaching the table and quietly called for him to stop.

It was Takiko.

Harutora stopped and the others also looked over. Suzuka, who was seeing her for the first time, understood that this was the girl they had talked about just now - after all, her external appearance was so distinguishing. She didn't say anything, but she obviously showed a look as if she were evaluating her.

Harutora's movements faltered.

"A-Ah, Takiko. Are you here to eat too?"

But Takiko didn't respond to Harutora, walking towards the table with a brooding expression.

After she arrived next to them,

"......Natsume."

She opened her mouth seriously.

"Sorry for coming late. Let me first say that I want to hide as little as possible from you. So please let me honestly tell you what I know."

Unlike her expression before, Takiko spoke flatly to the confused Natsume, Harutora, and company.

"First, your father Yasuzumi is fine. Although his whereabouts are currently unknown, he's definitely safe. Also, the reason the residence caught fire - more accurately, the person who 'set the fire' - seems to be Yasuzumi. But he took this action to obstruct the Onmyou Agency. I didn't think things would become like this either. I'm not sure what to say..... I'm extremely sorry."

Starting with Natsume, Harutora's group was speechless as they faced this sudden confession. Suzuka's expression seemed like it was saying 'something's wrong with this person's brain'. Actually, Harutora was unable to understand what she said for a short time.

The only exception was Touji. His expression slightly tightened and he stared at Takiko with a watchful gaze.

"......Eh?"

He murmured that in a conflicted tone, then questioned Takiko as an empty smile emerged on his face.

"Natsume's father set fire to the residence to obstruct the Onmyou Agency - is that what you mean? That's quite a strange explanation and a roundabout way of putting it. What's the main point? The Onmyou Agency attacked the Tsuchimikado family. The fire this morning was the result, is that the main point?"

"Hey, hey, Touji?"

Harutora unconsciously called out, but Takiko's explanation could indeed be interpreted that way. Moreover, Takiko didn't deny Touji's blunt words.

".....I thought we were heading in a different direction. Originally, we didn't need to oppose the Tsuchimikados, but something went wrong. It's just that..... I don't really want to say this, but the current head Yasuzumi has abandoned the Tsuchimikado's responsibility. He didn't respond to our persuasion and acted on his own. If some dispute happened in some communication with him..... There would be no helping it."

"H-Hold on, Takiko. What have you been saying? I'm completely confused. The Onmyou Academy and the Tsuchimikado's responsibility - what exactly happened?"

Harutora asked loudly, unable to stay patient. Takiko seemed to want to explain immediately and was about to open her mouth.

But she swallowed the words she wanted to say back down.

Then, she suddenly looked over her shoulder, where no one was there.

"I know. Don't interrupt."

She said quietly.

...Eh?

The group all showed astonished expressions at Takiko's sudden action.

But Harutora was different.

...Just now!

Before Takiko had looked over her shoulder and spoken, a flicker of aura had appeared near her. It was just a tiny bit, but it had definitely appeared.

...That was..... a shikigami? And a defensive one?

He couldn't confirm it, since it had just been for a moment. But he couldn't help but feel a chill after 'seeing' it for a moment.

What? Harutora trembled slightly, goosebumps rising on his skin. On the other hand, Takiko met Natsume's gaze head-on as if she had made a decision.

With an extremely cordial tone, she said:

"Natsume. I don't have the right to disclose any more. Tsuchimikado Yakou and I have personal ties..... No, they're ties of 'lineage'. I was always interested in you because you were Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation."

"......?"

Natsume breathed sharply, glancing at the others. All of their expressions were rigid.

"Takiko-san, are you a Yakou believer.....?"

"No!"

Takiko almost shouted unconsciously upon hearing the question that Natsume struggled to ask.

"I'm not. I'm different from the Yakou believers you know of, Natsume. Really. Please..... you have to believe me."

Takiko seemed to want to cry. But Natsume couldn't keep up with Takiko's changing emotions, and of course Tenma, Suzuka, and Harutora were the same.

...This girl.....?

She wasn't lying. Nor was she acting out of blind conviction. At the least he could confirm that point, though he couldn't find any reasons for it. Considering it calmly first, an ordinary person couldn't possibly know of the Yakou academy or the altar of the Taizan Fukun Ritual. She had professed that she and Yakou had ties, so he could finally understand those things - else, they couldn't be explained.

But what goal did she have for confessing like this? If she also knew of the Meguro incident, then of course she had heard of the clashes between Natsume and the Yakou fanatics. But from the looks of it, it seemed that Takiko wasn't provoking them or declaring war.

".....Takiko, what are your intentions?"

Harutora demanded. Takiko didn't resist as she agonized.

".....It's like I said in the morning, I hope to get along with everyone. Really..... that's all....."

Harutora didn't console Takiko upon seeing her dejected response. He just silently regretted his actions.

On the other hand, as everyone was silent, someone pressed questions on Takiko without paying the atmosphere around the table any heed.

"...Takiko. You're too selfish for one-sidedly wanting to make good relationships without explaining anything. Don't hide it anymore, just honestly tell us about yourself. What's up with your relationship with Yakou? This afternoon was the first time you heard about what happened to Natsume's home, right? Where did your information from just now come from? What kind of position are you in, and who's 'behind' you?"

Harutora felt overwhelmed as he saw his good friend's calm, composed actions. The interrogated Takiko silently lowered her head, biting her lip.

An ashamed, remorseful expression appeared under her red hair. Her speechless appearance was that of a child abandoned by her parents.

Then, Tenma interrupted the heavy atmosphere from the side.

"......Touji-kun. And Takiko-san. Though this is very important and we can't ignore it, there are a lot of people around watching us. Let's leave this for now."

Tenma planned on setting the issue aside for now. Touji glared at him from the side, as if criticizing him for lacking resolve. But Tenma didn't avert his gaze, silently facing Touji and shaking his head.

Coming to his senses, the surrounding students were indeed watching the dispute around him. Tenma's opinion was reasonable.

"Takiko-san, you still haven't eaten, right? Do you want to have lunch with us?"

Tenma invited Takiko without any pretense. Harutora admired his calm response. That responsibility had been taken up by Kyouko until now, but Tenma was reliably dealing with it since she currently wasn't around.

But, although Takiko was extremely happy after receiving Tenma's invitation,

"I can't."

She simply declined.

"Thanks, Tenma. But I'd feel too guilty if I ate with Natsume and you all right now. Just like Touji criticized me for, I indeed am hiding things, although I explained beforehand that I don't want to hide anything. But I still think that everyone will be able to understand me. I'm confident in that."

Takiko raised her head to look straight at Natsume.

"Sorry, Natsume. I've never had anyone I could talk closely with like you guys before this. So I'm definitely being unintentionally very rude..... But as someone walking the same road, as a true Onmyouji, I trust that we'll be able to understand each other someday. So I have a request."

".....Request?

Natsume replied tensely. Takiko gave a serious look and nodded affirmatively.

"I'm not good at expressing myself to others. My communication ability is very immature. But magic can convey things that can't be described in words. So, I want you and me to have a competition. Is that alright?"

Part 4

Natsume obviously had no reason to accept Takiko's proposal.

But contrary to Harutora's expectations, Natsume had agreed to Takiko's request. But with an additional condition.

"If I win, you have to tell us what you know. You don't have to say everything, but I want to know what happened in the fire at the residence this morning."

Natsume mentioned that matter and Takiko had obediently agreed.

But,

"Even if she loses, we can't guarantee that she'll tell the truth, right? Is that alright, Natsume?"

"......It's alright. She probably won't break a promise. I feel that way. Harutora, you think the same, right?'

It was like Natsume said. Though Harutora didn't have a shred of evidence, he trusted that Takiko wouldn't betray a promise. Natsume was even more guarded against Takiko than Harutora was, but at the same time she shared a similar impression.

"Moreover..... I feel like she's a bit similar to me."

"Similar to you?"

"Yeah. The me from before. So....."

Harutora didn't know what Natsume wanted to continue saying after the 'so'. But, Natsume's decision was already clear.

So, after school. Harutora and the others arrived at the magic practice field underneath the academy building.

Other than Harutora, Touji, Tenma, and Suzuka also came with Natsume, while Takiko was alone. But Takiko was the calmest as they entered the magic practice field. The unease she had shown in the cafeteria had dissipated and she seemed to want to focus her mind on the 'competition'.

Of course, it was actually a mock battle rather than a competition, like the independent training that Harutora and the others constantly held. How did Takiko see this mock battle? He still had that sort of anxiety in his heart.

...Can it be expressed with magic.....

When Harutora heard those words, the memory of the 'competition of magic' between Ohtomo and Ashiya Doman came to mind. Indeed, Ohtomo had obtained Doman's approval through that battle. Harutora himself had also experienced the power of the Meguro branch thirteenth team leader Eto through his mock battle with him. The 'ideals of someone who walks the same path of Onmyoudou' that Takiko spoke of and understanding that could only be conveyed through magic - maybe they truly existed.

But.....

...Ties with Yakou, huh?

Takiko's loudly-proclaimed shout that she wasn't a Yakou believer felt extremely sincere. But that didn't quell his anxiety. Harutora and the others had been endangered by Yakou fanatics not long ago.

Takiko didn't pay Harutora's worries any heed as she stood in the center of the stadium. Her resolute posture was elegant and beautiful, as if she possessed an irresistible attractive force.

".....Natsume, let's start."

Natsume also nodded solemnly as she heard Takiko's stern proposal.

Harutora immediately warned Natsume from behind her back.

"Natsume, be careful of her shikigami."

Natsume instantly turned around and nodded lightly, and then walked forward.

She faced Takiko near the center of the arena. Harutora and the others walked to the seats.

"......What do you think?"

Touji asked, his extremely casual voice revealing his supercilious and entertained mood. He was just purely enjoying this competition. It was best to describe him as carefree. Touji was always like that.

"Even among the current third-years, there aren't any students who can beat Natsume....."

"That girl isn't a student here, and we don't know her power."

"......In any case, we'll know soon."

Touji responded to Tenma's feelings and Suzuka summarized things.

Then, as Harutora watched:

"Then, start!"

Takiko and Natsume began sizing each other up.

Takiko was the first to move.

"Order!"

She threw out a charm along with a magical command. It was a water-element charm, and extremely powerful. The magic flow of water swirled into an eddy as it approached Natsume. Of course, this wouldn't make Natsume panic.

"...Earth conquers water. Order!"

She threw an earth-element charm to her feet, blocking Takiko's magic. But just then, Takiko unleashed another charm. A metal-element charm. A fire-element charm. Then, a wood-element charm. She didn't use them with mutual generation, she just released them in staggered intervals.

Her barrage of charms was proof of her strong aura. Natsume also accurately used charm magic to deal with Takiko's own.

"It looks like she's quite textbook."

Touji complained, bored.

A mock battle between those on the level of students was also quite a spectacle, but Touji and the others had already experienced several real battles and witnessed the techniques of professionals first-hand. It was natural for them to feel dissatisfied with the level of this competition.

But,

".....No, wait. Natsume! That charm magic hasn't ended, it's still hiding other magic!"

Harutora's voice warned Natsume but it was already too late. Takiko formed a hand seal, sticking an earth-element charm to the ground. One could see her refining magical energy in a flash as her red hair billowed like fire, its ornaments flashing.

"Five elements, come together and block the spirit flow - Order!"

The last of the five charms activated. At the same time, the magics hidden in the four charms from before were activated again. A pentagram appeared on the ground of the arena.

It was a barrier. But it was different from ordinary barriers, and Suzuka's eyebrows shot up.

"Blocking the spirit flow in the arena..... A guardian seal?"

"What's that?"

"It seals the defensive shikigami of the opponent - along with servant shikigami. Though whether it's a complete seal depends on the shikigami, it at least puts some shackles on the opponent's shikigami..... In other words, it suppresses the Tsuchimikado family dragon. Strategic."

"...Ah."

Harutora finally understood after hearing Suzuka's explanation. Unlike shikigami that were summoned through charms, defensive shikigami and servant shikigami who were always in a summoned state had a close connection of aura with their practitioner. In other words, a linked spirit flow. Takiko had blocked that connection.

...I see. The glimpse of Takiko's shikigami earlier had turned into a distraction!

In Takiko's eyes, her biggest 'threat' was Natsume's servant shikigami dragon, Hokuto. In a battle, it was a natural move to contain that first.

Moreover, Takiko had sealed Hokuto in anticipation, meaning that she believed that Natsume would use Hokuto.

Hokuto was a true dragon that had served generations of the Tsuchimikado family - a divine beast. Since his strength was game-breaking for the level of students, it was like a 'rule violation' to Harutora and the others for Natsume to summon Hokuto. So

Natsume definitely wouldn't use Hokuto during their independent training. Even in this mock battle, Natsume probably would have given a negative answer if she were asked whether she planned on summoning Hokuto.

But Takiko didn't think that way. Or rather, this was proof that she was treating this mock battle seriously. It wasn't just her. She also wanted to express the attitude that she wanted Natsume to fight seriously to the level where she would consider using Hokuto.

Takiko's message was clearly conveyed to Natsume. Natsume's attitude became more serious than before.

Her fingers moved and formed a seal. They fluidly transitioned from a dharmacakra seal to a magic binding seal. Takiko also reacted instantly.

"With the mortal world under my control, I subdue this evil spirit in the name of Acala's oath! On bishibishi karakara shibari sowaka!"

"Rin, hyo, toh, sha, kai, jin, retsu, zai, zen!"

Natsume's Unmoving Golden Chains was shattered by Takiko's kuji-in. The magical energy rose and scattered around the arena, and caused Natsume's black hair and Takiko's red hair along with their respective black and white uniforms to blow upwards. Before the aftermath had cleared up, the two of them began the next round of magic.

"Shikigami, arise. Order!"

Natsume threw out shikigami charms and summoned simple shikigami. It wasn't just one, nor was it two. Rather, more than ten - more than twenty shikigami charms turned into crows one after one, flapping their black wings as they flew. They drew out arcs as they attacked Takiko. Their sharp movements in the air made them resemble missiles that had been shot out of a fighter jet.

Takiko currently had a barrier placed in the arena, imposing a heavy burden on the spirit flow between the shikigami and practitioner. Releasing shikigami just now was Natsume's own way of responding to Takiko's techniques. Takiko's barrier would be meaningless if she released completely autonomous simple shikigami from the beginning after deciding on her magic.

But Takiko didn't give up either, swiftly throwing out charms that formed similar shikigami. White-winged heron simple shikigami countered the murder of black crows that Natsume had summoned.

The flock of larger white herons took flight and rushed to oppose the murder of crows. Intense lag spread all over the swarm of thrashing birds as black and white feathers scattered everywhere.

"I-Incredible!"

"Ah, it's very pretty."

Tenma was stunned, and Touji laughed happily.

In that period of time:

"Rushing stream, grow branches and capture! Order!"

"...Devouring soil, harden to metal and cut! Order!"

The water-element charm that Natsume threw from her right hand produced a cascade of water, and the wood-element charm she threw from her left hand turned into thorns that absorbed the water. The Five Elements Mutual Generation strengthened its power and it became long, flexible whips of thorns. But the earth-element charm Takiko released steadily grew, becoming metal blades that cut the thorns apart after Mutual Generation with a metal-element charm. It was water-generated wood versus the earth-generated metal, but metal conquered wood.

After the metal blades sliced apart the whips of thorns, they swiftly rushed straight for Natsume. Natsume immediately countered it with a fire-element charm. Then, she tossed an earth-element charm into the resulting flames, attempting to use Mutual Generation, but Takiko preemptively suppressed it with a water-element charm.

Takiko said:

"What's wrong, Natsume!"

She shouted and simultaneously summoned another simple shikigami.

"The Tsuchimikados' techniques - Yakou's techniques. This shouldn't be all there is!"

Surprisingly, the shikigami Takiko had newly summoned was in the shape of a dragon. It wasn't even half the size of Hokuto, but it was covered in silver scales, as if to contrast with the Tsuchimikado family guardian beast.

Natsume glared back at Takiko.

"I'm Tsuchimikado Natsume! I don't know Yakou or anything. What do I care!"

"......! So you also plan on avoiding your fate!"

Takiko roared and unleashed the silver dragon. In the end, it was only a simple shikigami, but it was infused with a strong magical energy and a complex magic could be seen within it.

"Ah."

Natsume rapidly threw protective charms in front of the dragon. But the dragon crashed through the magical wall and continued advancing. Natsume immediately tumbled, avoiding the simple shikigami's strike.

With a flip of her uniform sleeve, she tossed out several shikigami charms at once and created crow simple shikigami again. They entangled themselves with the dragon and hampered its movements. Using that time, she rose and put distance between them.

But Takiko didn't pass up the opportunity when Natsume had lost her balance. A charm flew out again. This time it was a fire-element charm, and a burning arrows of fire continuously stabbed towards Natsume's feet. Natsume ran with all her might, refining magic and forming a hand seal. Natsume had also already started the chant of her next incantation.

"Natsume! Hurry!"

Harutora shouted unconsciously.

Natsume stopped, exploding with magical energy.

"Suzaku! Genbu! Byako! Koujin! Nanto! Hokuto! Sandai! Gyokujo! Seiryuu!"

Kuji-kiri. A dazzling grid formed of nine lines emerged in front of Natsume. The radiant magic pattern took the strikes of all the arrows of fire, and even the silver dragon that leaped towards her after scattering the crows was scorched by the lines of light. Intense lag appeared over the dragon's entire body. "Nice!" Harutora cheered.

But,

"I'm not finished!"

Takiko shouted and pointed at the silver dragon with a blade seal. The magical energy that shot from her hands activated the magic 'hidden' in the simple shikigami. The dragon seemed to contract and fragment upwards, towards the ceiling.

"Eh?"

Crows and herons were still clashing above the dumbfounded Natsume's head. But Takiko's shikigami devoured the dragon's fragments right when they flew by.

The white feathers on the herons all scattered simultaneously like explosions, and were replaced by hard, silver feathers. Seeing this, Suzuka inadvertently gasped from next to Harutora.

"I see! She coordinated the shikigami with Five Elements Mutual Generation!"

"What?"

The dragon and the birds were all beasts of the Earthly Branches. 'Tatsu' was of earth, while 'tori' was of metal, and they paralleled each other. Indeed, the silver dragon and the white heron were each filled with earth and metal aura as pure simple shikigami. He had originally thought that this was an effect of the charm magic earlier, but that was wrong. They had been embodied with aura of the five elements when the shikigami had been infused with magic.

Takiko had planned the simple shikigami around the Earthly Branches' five elements and strengthened their power through Mutual Generation.

"Go!"

Takiko formed a blade seal and swung it at Natsume. The flock of herons spread their newly-obtained silver wings and swiftly descended on Natsume as their target.

It was a large-scale attack from above, and she couldn't dodge. Natsume rapidly crouched down and simultaneously threw charms above her head.

"Ban! Un! Taraku! Kiriku! Aku! Connect the five elements, Order!"

The five elements flashed, connecting to each other with lines of light and spreading into a magical wall in midair. This was the pentagram-shaped barrier magic that was the representative of the Tsuchimikado family Onmyoudou, as well as one of the

magics Natsume was best at. Natsume's barrier constantly flashed as it defended against the shikigamis' strafing even after they had been strengthened by Mutual Generation.

But,

"Trailokyavijaya of the east! Kundali of the south! Yamantaka of the west! Vajrayaksa of the north! Principal deity Acala of the center! Five elements connect, Order!"

Takiko chanted the incantation for the same kind of magic as Natsume's.

A pentagram barrier formed of the five elements. Like how Natsume had used the Five Buddhas of the Diamond Realm's seed syllables for her five-element incantation, Takiko used the names of the five Wisdom Kings as the five foundations of her incantation. The magical energy Takiko released headed towards the five-element barrier Natsume had put up.

...This girl!

She could clearly 'see' Takiko's magical energy penetrating the magic of the barrier. "Natsume!" Harutora called out loudly.

"She's trying to steal control of the magic! Run!"

After Harutora warned her, Takiko wrested away control of Natsume's barrier. The group of herons carrying the same kind of magical energy passed through the barrier unimpeded and assaulted Natsume. It was already too late for Natsume to move her body, and she could only block with her arms and shut her eyes. Harutora held his breath.

Right afterwards, a golden light swirled around Natsume like a shroud.

A circling dragon appeared.

It was Hokuto. Though its connection of spiritual power with its master had been blocked, it still noticed its master's crisis and appeared to use its body as a shield.

The golden scales covering Hokuto's entire body repelled all of the silver herons. Its giant eyes glared at Takiko, its pressure and presence incomparable to those of simple shikigami.

But.....

...Damn, that barrier's so powerful.

Hokuto was a servant shikigami that possessed its own consciousness, so that was why it was able to materialize on its own without its master's instructions. Even if the link of aura to its master was severed, it could still act independently.

But currently, it 'looked' like its strength was hampered by strong limitations and it was hard for it to wield its original power. The shikigami really was only complete with its master.

On the other hand,

".....This is the Tsuchimikado dragon, huh....."

Takiko's eyes flashed in front of the emerged Hokuto. Her voice was filled with awe and admiration, but no fear at all. In addition, the strength in her body even swelled and she raised the level magical energy inside her body.

Harutora clicked his tongue, unconsciously rushing out.

"Wait, Takiko. That's already enough. You might not get out unharmed if this goes on."

"Harutora, you stay out of this!"

"I can't do that! I'm also Natsume's shikigami!"

Harutora declared and ran beside Natsume and Hokuto. Tenma panicked, but Touji and Suzuka showed looks that said 'good timing' and watched Harutora.

Hokuto floated in midair as if to say 'leave this to me'. "......Harutora." The crouching Natsume slowly rose.

Harutora arrived in front of Natsume, confronting Takiko. Once they were face-to-face, Takiko's aura-intertwined red hair seemed closer to vermilion upon closer inspection. But what gave off a deeper impression than her hair was that her pure, sincere eyes were showing a noble expression of perseverance.

A strong, noble, pure existence. A prince, and also - a shaman. For some reason, those words emerged in his mind.

"...Takiko! Was what you wanted to convey through magic whether Natsume was Yakou or not? If that was the goal of your challenge, then what's different from what you're doing and what the Yakou fanatics did!?"

"......!"

Takiko's eyes widened upon hearing Harutora's accusation and her red hair seemed to rise like snakes.

"It's like Natsume said during the competition, we have nothing to do with Yakou. Who knows a thing about his reincarnation or stuff like that. I don't know what's up with the 'path of Onmyoudou' that you talk about either. We'll decide our own paths. If you still want to pester us with connections to the past, we'll have to ignore you!"

"....."

Takiko's face went pale and she strongly bit her lip, almost drawing blood.

Her slender shoulders covered in her uniform shook lightly as if she were forcefully suppressing herself, and anger and remorse rose from her entire body. She was like

a child who had firmly asserted that she was definitely right but had been defeated in a verbal confrontation.

The impression he had gotten in the classroom today morning reappeared in his mind. A magical power that didn't lose to Natsume's and cheerful and stubborn actions. A familiar character, and like a child where foolishness and clumsiness were mixed into one. That kind of impression was quite dangerous.

"......To think you all..... I....."

Takiko gritted her teeth, letting out a groan.

Then, she suddenly went slack.

She looked at Natsume from beneath the hair arranged over her forehead. Harutora felt an ominous air from her actions, calling out "Takiko!" loudly again.

But Takiko didn't listen. She just quietly and slowly sighed.

Then,

"... One, two, three, four... "

Instantly,

...Eh?

Once he heard Takiko's voice - the incantation - Harutora's heart instantly started beating faster with a thump and his vision became distorted.

He couldn't breathe and chills ran through his back. His limbs were paralyzed and he lost his reasoning ability.

Then, his aura went out of control.

...Wh-What's happening?

Harutora's aura thrashed like water inside a container being shaken vigorously and released magical energy. He unconsciously noticed the disaster, but he couldn't effectively deal with this crisis. Natsume seemed to call out something from behind him but he couldn't hear clearly. He saw Kon materialize in the corner of his vision. Takiko seemed to feel extremely surprised, and her gaze moved from Natsume to Harutora. Hokuto also curled its body in surprise. The surrounding reactions felt extremely distant from him.

A nauseous feeling that was hard to endure rushed up his throat and his spiritual energy poured out.

This was bad. He was going to go out of control. There was nothing he could do. Just as Harutora thought this--

A blue trail swooped before him.

...Eh?

His attention turned towards it. In the next moment, his field of vision spun ninety degrees.

He only noticed that his body had been bound and he had been pushed to the ground after he collapsed to the floor. He immediately 'saw' the swallow whose longest feathers had extended like whips and were wrapped around him. Then, several charms dropped onto his body like falling snowflakes.

No, it wasn't just around him. The charms that suddenly flew over also happened to surround Takiko and Natsume as well. They floated lightly like cherry blossoms in the spring breeze. Harutora, Natsume, Takiko, and even Hokuto's eyes widened in surprise.

"That won't do. It would be fine if it were a mock battle for individual training, but meaningless fights are prohibited."

An easygoing voice said with a strange Kansai accent that didn't match the atmosphere. Then came the sound of footsteps that eased his mind.

Harutora twisted his body to look over as he remained bound by the 'Swallow Whip'. In the front of his field of vision that had been turned ninety degrees was a slender - but extremely fearsome - familiar figure passing through the arena entrance. A smile emerged on Harutora's face, even though he was trussed up on the floor like a bundle of straw.

"Ohtomo-sensei!"

Their homeroom teacher grinned upon hearing Harutora's greeting.

Chapter 3 - Natsume and Kyouko

Part 1

She learned about this 'family tradition' a short time before she advanced to middle school.

Even when she was asked to be 'male', it was hard to do so suddenly. After ruminating, she planned to practice acting as a male through a simple shikigami.

At the beginning, she created a simple shikigami that looked like a boy. Hence, she understood that, unexpectedly, people only judged outer appearances. Even if she, who was the one truly acting though it, was a girl, no one would suspect anything if it was a boy on the outside. At least, it seemed that there was no risk of her true self being exposed in her daily life - at least for how Natsume was normally, as she seldom interacted with anyone and lived an uneventful life.

But it was Natsume herself who had to act like a male, not the shikigami. She still had to be perceived as a male even with a feminine appearance.

Consequently, Natsume created a shikigami modeled to be a girl her own age.

Although she had considered using a personality similar to her own, she felt that it would be more suitable for its actions to be boyish, so she tried practicing with a different style. The reference she used was a girl idol on television that Harutora had liked before. Drawing from the impression - 'so you like that kind of girl' - she remembered after feeling inadvertently interested, the simple shikigami was born. Even though it was just the second attempt, it was very well crafted. It even felt cute to her feminine sensibilities, and it was very suitable for a cheerful smile. But when she thought that Harutora would probably be attracted to her, an anxiety that had sprouted recently began creeping through Natsume's heart.

During the last few years, Harutora came to play at Natsume's house less frequently. She was well aware of the cause. The two of them had become acutely aware of each other and couldn't play around innocently like before. And right now it was the same. Maybe Harutora also had this kind of cheerful, cute girl in his middle school. The current Harutora might be having fun with her right at this moment. She couldn't help but obsess over those thoughts.

Harutora would become Natsume's shikigami as per the branch family's family tradition. But that was a tradition at best, nothing more than a mere obligation. Even if Harutora became Natsume's shikigami, that didn't mean the two of them would regain the familiarity they had in the past.

The family tradition indeed existed. She also remembered their childhood promise. But unlike the main family, the current branch family wouldn't be as dedicated to the 'Tsuchimikado' as her father was. Even if Natsume firmly remembered their past promise, she wasn’t certain whether Harutora still remembered it and whether he would seriously comply with it. As the time they spent together dwindled and their relationship grew distant, anxiety rooted itself in Natsume's heart and slowly grew.

She wanted to see Harutora.

But she didn't have the courage to say it. When exactly had she stopped being forthright with Harutora?

"......Right."

She had this simple shikigami. Maybe she should try it in the town Harutora was in. She could be an unreserved girl with a bold appearance and a cheerful boyish attitude.

If she met with Harutora with that kind of attitude, she could definitely express herself better. She could regain her innocence and childhood familiarity from before.

.....She couldn't.

Natsume's eyes widened when she happened to meet Harutora by chance, and she tried to talk but ended up running like the wind.

Then, the two of them formed a brand-new relationship.

Afterwards, that summer day began--

This unremarkable clinic that could be mistaken for an ordinary home blended into the scenery of a residential area.

It was close to dawn, and a short-tailed wild cat strolled through the front of the courtyard. The surroundings were still tranquil and asleep, and the noise of truck engines as they drove close by sounded occasionally.

There was only one person staying at this clinic. But this patient was planning on leaving on his own without the permission of the hospital manager.

".....So you're saying that we still don't have any information on Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi?"

"It's true that we don't have any information, and we don't actually know his whereabouts - we can't contact him. Well, there's still time. Also, he didn't have much of a connection to the Onmyou Agency in the first place....."

He had white hair and crude glasses. The bathrobe that served as his sleepwear had already been removed and he had changed to a well-worn suit. Ohtomo held the phone with one hand while roughly packing the things next to him into his suitcase.

This was more like an escape at night than the departure of a resident patient. Actually, Ohtomo had decided to leave on his own several minutes ago - when he had received a phone call of his former co-worker and close acquaintance since his student days, Kogure Zenjirou. More specifically, he learned of the fire that had occurred an hour ago in the old home of a student, Tsuchimikado Natsume, from the class he was responsible for.

"Anyway, I don't have any detailed information either. All I can confirm is that the Tsuchimikado family residence is completely burned down. This will be broadcast on television and other media in the morning."

"....."

Ohtomo's expression was extremely grave.

Though the Tsuchimikado family had already declined, in the end it was once a prominent Onmyoudou family. The news that the residence of the family that could be called the head sect had been burned down would definitely be a great shock to the magic community. Of course, the Tsuchimikado family had long since left the upper echelons. Even if it would shock the community, it wouldn't carry any tangible effects. The Onmyou Agency would still be able to act unimpeded. This incident essentially wouldn't change anything.

But, Ohtomo gradually realized that this was only the surface.

There were changes. No, he feared that this incident itself was the result of changes that had already happened. Currently, something was happening in the Onmyou Agency. He couldn't uncover it, and most people didn't notice, but there were indeed

certain definite, real changes going on. It was among the higher-ups - more accurately, the 'depths' of the Onmyou Agency organization.

Moreover, Ohtomo believed that those in charge of the changes had decided to leave him behind.

It was decisive - and probably deadly.

"......I know about the main family. Then what about the branch family? The main family head went into hiding, but is the branch family still running their Onmyou doctor business?"

"We can't get in touch with them either. The Mystical Investigators seem to be moving....."

Kogure, on the other end of the phone, was also very confused. Though he had immediately reported on the business concerning Natsume, he didn't know any details. Kogure was an exorcist, and he had no way of immediately obtaining more information. Furthermore, he was still at the Exorcist Bureau on standby in order to guard against any spiritual disasters that happened during the night. Even as part of the Onmyou Agency, what he could do was very limited.

"If Amami-san was still around now, he'd definitely have more detailed information....."

Ohtomo, who was preparing to leave the hospital, paused when he heard the disheartened words that Kogure inadvertently said. But his expression remained unchanged and he immediately started packing again.

Ohtomo noticed the 'changes' within the Onmyou Agency because of Amami's disappearance.

According to Kogure's information, the Mystical Investigator Chief Amami Daizen had suddenly disappeared without a trace the night that the operation against the Twin-Horned Syndicate ended. On that day, which had begun with a forced investigation by the Mystical Investigators, there had been a magical battle in the Exorcist Bureau Shinjuku branch with the Twin-Horned Syndicate and a battle in the Meguro branch against the multiple spiritual disasters. These events that occurred successively from morning to late in the day could be described as a towering tsunami. In particular, the spiritual disasters had caused widespread destruction, which led to the Onmyou Agency falling into an enormous mess and caused the disruption of the Exorcist Bureau's business for several days. Most of the agency members were forced to deal with other emergencies and had to go all out. Amami had 'vanished' amidst that chaos.

Chief Kurahashi, upon learning of Amami's disappearance, had quickly taken command of the Mystical Investigators himself and dealt with the various issues of the aftermath. That state of affairs was still continuing now. That meant that Kurahashi Genji was simultaneously the head of the Mystical Crime Investigation Department, the Onmyou Agency Chief and the Exorcist Bureau Chief. Though it was a temporary arrangement, it currently couldn't be determined when it would change.

"......How's the Onmyou Agency with regard to the Tsuchimikado fire?"

"If you're asking about their reactions, most people still don't know right now."

"I'm not asking about reactions. I was asking what it's 'like'. To put it clearly, I'm interested in how it was before the incident happened."

"......There weren't any unusual occurrences before the incident, I think? Sorry. At least, I didn't notice any, as I've been busy purifying spiritual disasters all the time recently."

"......You don't know about the current state of the Mystical Investigators either?"

"I'm not clear on the details. As for my personal feelings, although the Chief's disappearance was shocking, they aren't having any problems operating....."

"What does that mean?"

"Of course, the Mystical Investigators I know are feeling confused. But their deployments aren't visibly disordered and they're functioning well. At least from the outside, the Chief's command seems solid, though I'm not sure whether it's just that the problem areas haven't reached the ears of outsiders..... What should I say, it's like they themselves are being used without knowing why either....."

Ohtomo listened to Kogure's mixed feelings with a serious expression.

Ohtomo had been extremely furious in his hospital room after he heard about the Meguro incident. Especially when he heard that Kagami's shikigami, Shaver, had gone out of control and attacked the students, he had wanted to immediately rush out of the hospital room and curse Kagami to death. Of course, he also felt angry at the Onmyou Agency for loosening Kagami's shackles and at Amami for allowing him to guard Natsume in the first place.

But after he heard that Amami had disappeared, he had completely pushed aside his personal feelings. The brunt of his anger and impatience instead turned towards himself, who didn't know anything at all.

The situation was extremely serious.

"Anyway, all we can do right now is wait for the reports afterward. When the sun comes up, we might find out that it was just an ordinary fire....."

"Are you an idiot?"

"......You're right. Forget what I said just now."

Amami's disappearance wasn't Amami's own problem. Of course, it couldn't be a simple fire that had burned the Tsuchimikado residence. In fact, it could be evidence that the Twin-Horned Syndicate, the organization acting in the shadows, had even deeper roots. Also, there was the Onmyou law reform the Onmyou Agency was currently pushing for and the widened jurisdiction it would bring to the Agency.

He shouldn't rush to a conclusion. But, it was clearly very suspicious that the second most powerful person in the organization had mysteriously disappeared without any clues and without causing any panic in the organization itself. That meant that Amami had already been 'removed' from the important duties of the Onmyou Agency. It could also be put a different way. The 'former Onmyou Agency' that Ohtomo and Kogure were familiar with was currently in turmoil. A 'different group' had established itself inside the organization and was using the confusion within the 'former Onmyou Agency' to absorb the agency as it continued its normal duties.

The uncomfortable feeling Kogure felt from the Mystical Crime Investigation Department probably had the same origins. This could also be proof of what kind of level the 'change' inside the organization had already reached.

Resigning from the Mystical Investigators and living a calm, easy life was probably better for him.

Amami had vanished. Kagami was in confinement - it seemed that he was being imprisoned inside the Onmyou Agency. Then he didn't have to pay attention to matters that wouldn't affect the current situation right now. There was no need to feel agitated about each and every thing. Right now he had to be calm and act with precision.

"Then, Jin."

"What."

"I know that you're making a lot of speculations in this kind of situation..... Don't cause too much of a scene."

Ohtomo's mouth revealed a bitter smile as he listened to his old friend's worries.

".....Yeah."

After that brief reply, Ohtomo hung up Kogure's phone call.

It would have been better if he had taken action immediately after hearing the news that Amami had vanished. He hadn't done that because he wanted to temporarily stay out of the fray and clarify the situation.

But, although indirectly, he had already started to neglect the students he was responsible for, so he had to act. He could only break into the storm. Ohtomo put away his phone, closing his luggage.

But just then, Ohtomo shuddered and froze.

He felt a jolt of tension and killing intent. A dangerous gleam sparked from his eyes beneath the glasses.

But Ohtomo's fingers that deftly reached for charms went limp before he could grab any. Instead, his reaction was replaced with regret and a cold sweat.

"......Are you trying to scare me, Priest? I'm easily frightened, so this isn't good for my heart."

He complained half jokingly and half seriously.

Then,

"......Hoh."

A soft sigh came from the corridor outside the hospital room. Then, the sliding door opened by itself.

A young boy stood in the corridor.

He was probably still an elementary schooler, and he wore old-fashioned black clothing under a vest, cropped trousers, and black leather shoes. Also, he wore a bowtie. He was dressed in all black - except his red teashade sunglasses.

The quiet sound of footsteps came from the boy's black leather shoes as he walked into the hospital room. Ohtomo stopped packing his luggage, leaning lightly against the bed as he faced the boy. With a bitter expression, he endured the boy's upward gaze through his sunglasses.

".....This time you're a kid? Pardon me, but don't you think that's in a bit of bad taste?"

"It's because the 'possession' has to meet many conditions, and also because my circumstances didn’t offer very many options."

He said with a satisfied smile. Ohtomo also felt that there was nothing to do other than smile wryly.

"Ah, this time you smile pretty normally."

"It's because the body is still new. .....Ah, let me first explain to quell your worries, I didn't kill this child. He would have been burned to death regardless if I didn't touch him, so I just repurposed him."

The boy leisurely answered Ohtomo's question. The words the boy spoke seemed extremely strange, but Ohtomo believed that they were probably true. Ohtomo himself had pondered whether he could use a soulless corpse as a vessel.

A stool in the corner of the hospital room suddenly glided behind the boy on its own. The boy jumped and sat on the stool. It was as if there was an invisible helper, and actually that was indeed the case. The boy's shikigami were also here, and there were

probably two. Ohtomo didn't have the confidence that he could win even against one of them.

".....Could that be that 'oni' that attacked the Onmyou Agency building?"

"Huh? Oh, those guys? Yes. Come to think of it now, it would have been fine if I brought one along with me. In that case, that 'competition of magic' would have become even more exciting."

"No, no, no. In that case, I would have quickly surrendered."

Ohtomo maintained his smile but he still sweated as he spoke honestly to the boy on the chair - Ashiya Doman. Truly a visitor that was bad for his heart.

".....So? What's your business here tonight, Domahoshi?"

"Hoho. What do you think?"

"Well, you've come for revenge - I can only pray that's not the case."

Those were his true, heartfelt thoughts. After all, this was an opportunity. If Doman was an 'assassin' the Twin-Horned Syndicate sent, then there was no better situation than this.

But Doman frowned in slight displeasure upon hearing Ohtomo's dark humor.

"How unexpected. Did you think this old man would treat that 'competition of magic' so irresponsibly?"

"That's why I'm praying it's not like that. After all, it's hard for someone of my level to guess your intentions, Priest."

"Hmph. But you're very candid."

"I've already given up resisting. I'm like a fish on the chopping block."

Ohtomo shrugged his shoulders at Doman. It wasn't modesty, but rather the pure truth. Ohtomo had no confidence in winning against Doman in another battle - nor even the confidence that he could 'survive'.

Doman harrumphed, seeming to still be a bit dissatisfied.

"Revenge and such are extremely detestable. My intentions for coming here are just the opposite."

"Opposite?"

"Yes. Back then, some rude person disturbed us after the victor was decided. I've come again to give the victor his spoils."

Doman leaned back on the chair, swinging his legs and proclaimed in an exaggerated manner. Ohtomo's eyes widened.

"You said give the victor his spoils..... You mean me, Priest?"

"Of course. You accepted Ashiya Doman's challenge and didn't receive anything after winning. That's a disgrace to my name. No, this old man's name doesn't matter, but I'd feel guilty."

"......Ah....."

"Then, Onmyouji Ohtomo Jin. Ask anything you desire. Don't be reserved."

"....."

It was indeed a bit perplexing. Ohtomo forced cordial smile as he faced Doman's sudden proposition.

The proposition of that great Onmyouji was enticing. If he truly accepted it, it would be joyous yet unfortunate. There probably was no deeper meaning. It was probably

due to Doman's truly good intentions - more accurately, due to his integrity that had flared up for a while.

But, it was 'that' Ashiya Doman. The feelings of his longtime enemy 'D'. Even if he said not to be reserved, he still didn't know what would be best. Moreover, he didn't want to be associated with him again.

"Then, why don't you let me go for now....."

"What? That kind of boring request can't count as a wish. There's nothing else? There must be, right? A lot of things."

"Then, promise that you won't lay a hand on me of the Onmyou Academy students again....."

"What. That's too apathetic too. Let's not speak of the past. Come up with some other wish."

"Please don't appear for a while....."

"No, no. Don't you have any more clever ideas?"

".....Didn't you say anything would do....."

"Huh? You weren't listening very clearly. I said don't be reserved. Be more earnest."

In the end, he was an ara-mitama, an unreasonable spiritual disaster. If Ohtomo made him unhappy, he might be killed, and he didn't know what kind of disaster would result from irritating him. He didn't know when it had started, but he felt even more deeply that his luck with the elderly was very bad.

Ohtomo sighed helplessly.

"Ah..... Then, Priest? Was the 'rude disturbance' you mentioned just now something the Twin-Horned Syndicate did?"

"The explosion? Probably."

Doman affirmed Ohtomo's question.

The two of them were talking about the incident after Doman had admitted defeat in the 'competition of magic'. At the time, Doman's old man body had been blasted to pieces by the explosion of a bomb set on the high-class sedan. That was something the Twin-Horned Syndicate had done, fearing that Doman would leak information.

"Does that mean I can believe you've cut your connections with the Twin-Horned Syndicate?"

"Yeah. Well, they did such a barbaric thing after all. This old man no longer has any need to care about them."

"Then, can you tell me something about the Twin-Horned Syndicate? About the people in the Twin-Horned Syndicate's shadows."

Ohtomo's tone was indifferent, but a focused gaze shone from the eyes beneath his glasses. Doman seemed to be finally satisfied and snickered quietly.

"The shadows, huh. It's been the Onmyou Agency holding their leash. You mostly figured that out from the commotion before, right?"

".....Well, did that commotion lure out the ones holding their reins?"

"I don't know that. This old man was never one of their core members. Rather, we used each other and didn't take the initiative to become more involved."

Doman replied to Ohtomo's question.

"If this old man understands correctly, their roots are even deeper. Perhaps you won't even be able to see everything even after digging deeper."

Ohtomo seemed to agree with Doman's conclusion and nodded his head sincerely. Doman's feelings were the same as Ohtomo had predicted. It would be nice if he could have revealed some specific names, but the 'other side' had probably been very careful to keep from giving the volatile Doman any extraneous information.

"You can keep asking about other things."

"......Then, Priest. What was the goal of your looking for the 'Raven's Wing'?"

"Well. There actually wasn't a particularly deep reason. I wanted it because of my disciple's request."

Ohtomo's mind wavered slightly as he heard Doman's reply.

"......Disciple."

His mutter contained bit of sentimentality that was unlike his style.

Doman didn't miss that detail and let out a laugh that sounded like a wild beast that had smelled blood.

"Have you heard? It seems that you knew each other. No, in any case, when you were still a Mystical Investigator chasing after the Twin-Horned Syndicate and closing in on this old man, you also had that woman as your target, right? Saotome Suzu, who escaped from the Onmyou Agency and came to me. Isn't that right?"

Doman leaned forward slightly from his chair, asking happily.

"I once doubted whether I was misunderstood since you involved yourself in everything during the 'competition of magic'..... It seems like that wasn't the case. Your relationship is quite deep-rooted."

Ohtomo didn't reply immediately. A deep smile just emerged on his face, like he was affirming Doman's words but at the same time denying them.

Silence continued for a moment.

Then, without commenting, Ohtomo said:

"......Is she still doing well?"

He asked Doman.

Doman showed a somewhat dissatisfied expression upon seeing Ohtomo's attitude.

But without verbally reproaching him, he said:

"Sorry. She's already left."

"...Eh?"

"It was a few days ago. She said some polite things about being grateful for the hospitality, but it seems that her business with this old man is over. What a cheeky person. But she also did quite well, so I don't have any thoughts of finding her and putting her straight."

"......What does it mean that her business is over?"

"I don't know. I don't intend to hide it, but even, no, I don't know what that person is thinking. Well, it's enough if it's interesting."

Doman spoke happily and casually. Ohtomo chewed his lip. The current Ohtomo didn't have his normal leisurely atmosphere at all. He looked like a young, normal, immature youth.

It was silent for a while again.

Not long afterwards, Doman seemed to feel satisfied and smiled.

He dropped to the floor from the stool.

"We'll leave it at this tonight. The sun's about to rise."

Just like before he had sat down, the stool moved by itself and returned to its original position.

"But, that question and answer session wasn't enough as a 'victor's reward'."

"A, no. That kind of thing....."

"Alright. Then I'll owe you one for now. If you have some request in the future, just call for this old man and I'll help you out."

Ohtomo was inadvertently stunned upon seeing Doman's patronizing manner.

"......Priest. Could 'that' have been your goal from the beginning? To cast a curse on me."

"Hoho. You're the one who's twisted for seeing it as a 'curse', not I. Why don't you treat it purely as this old man's good intentions?"

"......In the end, is there any difference?"

"Hohoho."

Doman laughed like a maniac. Ohtomo slumped his shoulders in exhaustion.

He could borrow Ashiya Doman's strength during a critical moment.

That indeed sounded like a valuable and useful proposition. But contrary to the good intent on the surface, the offer contained an invisible 'poison' in it.

Ohtomo had started watching the stealthy movements of the Onmyou Agency, so having Doman's assistance as a ‘trump card’ was alluring. That had to be so. But if Ohtomo requested his aid, then he would be the first one to 'rely' on Doman. Of course, though it was possible that he would be able to resist until the very end, once he heard such a sweet proposition, Ohtomo would become more and more conscious of how strong a card Doman's assistance would be if the situation became more and

more dangerous in the future. Even if he normally ignored it, the more intense things got, or when everything was on the line, that card would become salient in Ohtomo's consciousness.

Doman had set up the curse of an unbreakable connection to him in Ohtomo's mind.

"Then, hurry up and take out your phone. Put my phone number in."

The boy reached out his right hand. Ohtomo wrinkled his face and obediently gave out his phone.

"......It's unexpected that you use a cell phone, Priest."

"That's obvious. How could I not have such an interesting thing. It's just unfortunate that every time I encounter something of this sort, I feel like 'magic' will soon be unnecessary."

"......It's hatefully convincing when the great Ashiya Doman says that."

"Kekeke. Shouldn't we behind-the-times colleagues get along well?"

"....."

Doman recorded the phone number with swift, experienced hands and then tossed back Ohtomo's phone.

"See you again."

Doman left the hospital room after leaving those words. The sliding door closed by itself again, and the sound of the boy's footsteps slowly became distant in the corridor. Ohtomo stared at the phone in his hand with a sullen face.

"......Honestly."

If Amami were here, he would definitely have laughed loudly as he said that ara-mitama were no joke.

But there were a few things he had to do right now, so he put Doman's matter to the side for now. First was..... The business of the Tsuchimikado fire. He couldn't just ignore the students who had lost their old home.

Ohtomo went back to packing his luggage for his departure.

The night had already passed without a sound when he walked out of the hospital room.

Part 2

"Ohtomo-sensei!"

Their homeroom teacher smiled upon hearing Harutora's greeting.

He walked into the magic practice field supported by his cane, his wooden fake leg thumping audibly. "Oh my, oh my." Ohtomo murmured leisurely and surveyed the arena.

"Truly a mock battle to shame a professional. Natsume-kun, you've gotten better these past few days."

"Sensei.....!"

Natsume's eyes also moistened when she heard Ohtomo's leisurely voice. Suzuka and Tenma, who had been taken aback by Harutora's reaction, also showed relieved expressions like everyone else. "What an interesting moment," Touji murmured happily with a wry smile.

Ohtomo looked warmly at his students' reactions.

Then, he turned to the red-haired girl.

"You're Souma Takiko, huh? Your skills are very amazing. There are very few kids this capable..... And you even brought such a frightening shikigami."

Harutora, collapsed on the ground, hastily looked in Takiko's direction as he heard Ohtomo's words. At some point - probably the moment Ohtomo appeared - a young man had stood next to Takiko with a stance as if protecting her.

His age seemed to be not too different from Takiko's. That meant he was the same age as Harutora's group. He gave off a gentle impression, but his body was very strong and robust. His long hair danced, tied messily behind his head. His eyes were

sharp and calm, and they showed a wisdom and comprehension beyond his age. Like those of an ascetic wandering monk who pursued enlightenment.

He wore a moss-green coat that didn't match the season, with jeans and laced long boots underneath. He didn't look like a shikigami just based on his appearance. But the aura intertwined with his body wasn't a human's. A shikigami. Takiko's defensive shikigami.

But,

...As expected, that shikigami has.....?

He wasn't an ordinary defensive shikigami or a manmade shikigami. He might be a servant shikigami, the same kind as Hokuto. But even so, he was still unusual. While he just stood there naturally, he also produced an extraordinarily threatening impression.

Just like Hokuto, Takiko's shikigami probably suffered quite a burden from the barrier Takiko had imposed over the spirit flow. But no such burden could be felt from Takiko's shikigami at all. It wouldn't be too much to say that the presence its aura gave off rivaled Hokuto's. Even Harutora 'saw' that.

".....Kumomaru, back down."

Takiko commanded in a firm voice.

The shikigami obeyed his master's instruction without even glancing at the master behind him. Still keeping its guarded stance towards Harutora and the others - or more accurately, it was mostly Ohtomo - it wordlessly retreated from in front of Takiko. Ohtomo looked at the shikigami with an unreadable expression.

"H-Harutora-sama....."

Kon noticed Harutora's abnormal condition and materialized, helping up her collapsed master. Ohtomo confirmed his condition and beckoned with his finger. Then, the 'Swallow Whip' binding Harutora's body released him and returned to Ohtomo with a flap of its wings, turning back into a shikigami charm.

Ohtomo put the charm back into the inner pocket of his suit and smiled.

"Then, let me perform my supervisory duty as a homeroom teacher. The principal will scold me if I let my students be harmed. Let's end the mock battle here, alright? Leave the rest for later. I'll watch it from the beginning till the end next time."

Ohtomo took responsibility with a relaxed tone and then clapped his hand as if saying that things were done here.

"Takiko-kun. You came to the Onmyou Academy today to observe their studies. It's a rare opportunity, so why don't I take you on a tour of the academy building? Repairs to this building just finished, and we spent a lot of money. It's worth a look. Also, do you want to hear about the contents of the curriculum?"

Ohtomo invited Takiko with a smile as he chattered.

Though they already knew Ohtomo's power now, it was more like his style to be dubiously reliable and leisurely. He wasn't acting, it was just one side of Ohtomo.

But Takiko, who received the invitation, paled and remained motionless like a rock.

"......Princess."

The shikigami named Kumomaru quietly warned her from behind. Takiko bit her lip and was silent for a moment, then finally and slowly closed her eyes.

She deeply lowered her head, her red hair drooping down alongside.

"......I'll go back for today. Sorry..... to bother."

Takiko calmly announced with her head lowered.

Then, she turned and walked towards the arena exit without looking at Harutora's group again. Kumomaru followed close behind his master, but gave them a glance.

The last person the shikigami looked at wasn't Ohtomo, it was Natsume. In that moment, a pained expression flashed across his face for some reason. But he immediately pursued his master and it couldn't be discerned what the meaning of that expression was.

In the end, Takiko didn't turn around up through the point where her figure vanished from the arena.

Natsume sighed deeply after Takiko left. She raised her head to thank Hokuto while releasing its materialization.

"......Maybe I'm hated. Well. That's probably not it. That girl seems to have a lot of secrets....."

Ohtomo murmured to himself a bit remorsefully.

Then, he looked at Harutora and the others again and smiled to change the atmosphere.

He showed a gentle and affectionate smile. Harutora and Natsume returned the smile, driven by his own. "Sensei." Then, Tenma jogged over, and Touji and Suzuka walked over as well.

"Sensei, when did you leave the hospital? You’re already fine?"

"Oh, I've made you worry. Tenma-kun. I left the hospital this morning."

"Your hair still hasn't recovered. Why don't you just dye it?"

"Maybe. It might not be a bad idea to dye it a dark brown."

"You're so lazy, you know. It was pretty tough around here while you were sleeping."

"Haha, sorry, sorry. Spare me."

Ohtomo continued to reply to Tenma, Touji, and Suzuka with an unflappable attitude. It was hard to believe based on appearance that this was the Onmyouji who had waged a great battle with Ashiya Doman. After he chatted for a while, Ohtomo attended to Harutora and Natsume.

First, he moved in front of Harutora, who still sat on the ground, and crouched down. He looked at him, matching his eye level.

"Eh? Sensei?"

To the confused Harutora, he said:

"When did it start?"

He asked in a steady voice.

But in contrast to his steady tone, the gaze Ohtomo stared at Harutora with was extremely piercing. Harutora was taken aback. Of course, Ohtomo was probably asking about the instability of Harutora's aura.

"......S-Since the Meguro incident. At the time, I was a bit reckless....."

"I see. I heard that you performed quite outstandingly....."

Ohtomo's gaze became even sharper as he 'looked' at Harutora's condition. Kon sat next to Harutora, holding her master's shoulders a bit anxiously.

"What? What's going on?"

Suzuka asked, not understanding what was going on, and Natsume briefly explained how Harutora's magical energy had almost gone out of control when he got out of

bed a few days ago. Touji seemed to have noticed that Harutora's aura hadn't been too stable recently but hadn't thought it was this serious. He was stunned after hearing Natsume's words.

"Is the reason why his aura just went berserk also due to the same cause? Honestly..... You and Harutora are always causing trouble for us."

"I'm not making trouble on purpose! .....Ohtomo-sensei. How is Harutora's aura? Was the abnormal reaction just now.....?"

Natsume asked seriously.

But Ohtomo was still observing Harutora, muttering vaguely. His gaze slowly examined Harutora's entire body and then stopped on a corner of his left eye - the magical pentagram pattern, proof of his contract with Natsume.

Ohtomo's eyes narrowed into slits.

".....This magical pattern....."

"Ah, ah, that star? That's from when I became Natsume's shikigami..... But it's not just a simple contract mark, it also lets me see spirits. It's a sign of the magic Natsume cast."

Harutora looked up at Natsume next to him. Natsume nodded, repeating the explanation she had given Harutora before.

Natsume had used this magic to let Harutora, who originally didn't have the spirit-seeing ability, 'see' aura. But that magic was actually a Tsuchimikado family secret, and Natsume herself had only learned it from her father and didn't understand it.

Ohtomo's expression tightened severely after he listened to Natsume's explanation. Her homeroom teacher's reaction made Natsume even more anxious.

"Is this magic really the cause?"

"......I can't say it's the direct cause, but this is probably the trigger. But it's not just because of this. In the end, you're practically a different person from before. The true reason might be....."

Ohtomo spoke evasively, his gaze became even more piercing. But in the end, he sighed and stood up as if he didn't get it.

"Sensei?"

"Sorry, Harutora. To be honest, it seems like I can't resolve it. It would be best to let a talented Onmyou doctor conduct a detailed examination..... In the end, it's a Tsuchimikado family secret magic, so it's a bit dangerous to deal with recklessly."

As he said this, he extended an arm to Harutora who sat on the ground. Harutora grabbed his homeroom teacher's arm with a complex expression, and slowly got up.

"For now, I'll write the magic that stopped you from going out of control just now on charms and give them to you. Well, that kind of magic basically just disperses released magical energy. We'll just improvise for now. If something like before happens again, have Natsume come find me and I'll help you deal with it."

"Really!? Thank you so much!"

"Right now isn't the time to be happy. The instability of your aura might have a natural cause, and I still don't know whether we can fundamentally resolve it with magic."

"R-Really? A natural problem... I guess I never had the spirit-seeing ability in the first place....."

"No, it's not that kind of minor problem. Also, when I say natural, it's just a possibility in the end. Your condition right now is extremely unnatural, and it kind of feels artificial..... No, but..... well....."

Ohtomo crossed his arms and pondered.

He suddenly looked towards Suzuka.

"Hey, Suzuka-kun. This should be your field of expertise, right? I'll secretly release your seal again, so can you help me with an inspection?"

"Hah? Me?"

Suzuka's eyes widened upon hearing Ohtomo's proposal. Though her strength was limited, Suzuka was a National First-Class Onmyouji known as the 'Child Prodigy' after all. Her specialty was researching 'Imperial Onmyoudou', and she was indeed more suitable than the former Mystical Investigator Ohtomo when it came to research.

"You want me to unravel the Tsuchimikado secret magic? Why should I have to do such a troublesome thing."

"It's fine. Incidentally, you can do whatever you want with Harutora's body, you know?"

"....."

Ohtomo's frivolous proposal made Suzuka blush down to her neck. "Sensei!" Harutora and Natsume all cried out in a wail. "It's a joke." Ohtomo smiled irresponsibly. The still-materialized Kon's eyes were narrowed and her hand was already grasping her beloved blade, Kachiwari.

In the end - putting aside their other effects for now - Ohtomo's words indeed alleviated the present atmosphere.

"Well, we'll just use the magic I prepare to manage it. I'll go try searching for your parents in that time too. If I find them, I'll have one of them do a thorough examination."

Harutora suddenly thought of that incident, faced with those words and the gentle look that Ohtomo gave Natsume.

"Sensei, about the fire this morning....."

Not a tinge of sadness could be felt from Ohtomo's attitude:

"......Yeah, I heard about it."

He admitted.

"It was really something. But you can't be depressed right now. Contact hasn't been made with Natsume's father, but I heard that he was safe and sound. I'll help you guys as much as I can too, so be optimistic for now."

His words were calm and positive, and he wasn't deliberately cheering them up to win them over. Natsume quickly replied "Yeah" as if she had received some kind of inspiration.

"Incidentally,"

Touji interrupted from the side.

"In the mock battle just now, we promised that if Natsume won we would be able to hear from the other side."

"Hear from..... From Takiko-kun? Why would she?"

"Who knows. Truly a mysterious person. I don't know how much she understands, but I don’t believe she's exaggerating."

"......Who is she?"

"She called herself someone related to Yakou's lineage, but it's unclear what that means."

"To Yakou?"

Ohtomo was confounded when he heard Touji's explanation. "Lineage, huh....." He murmured those extremely vague words.

"......Well, I can't call that Priest so soon. Well, I'll find the principal for now and listen to what she has to say....."

Ohtomo mumbled some words.

Then, noticing the gazes of Harutora and the others:

"Oh, right."

He changed the topic.

"Come to think of it, I don't see Kyouko-kun. What's up? Is she absent today?"

Of course, his question had no other meaning. But Harutora and the others didn't reply immediately. Ohtomo blinked upon seeing the students' silent reactions.

Touji shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"She's having a quarrel with this group right now. And it's quite severe."

"Is that so? Why did you fight at this time? .....Was there some reason?"

"It's because Natsume's true identity was revealed. Well, it might not be so right for me to say it after knowing but deliberately concealing it, but it's excusable that she's mad."

Harutora and Natsume also shrank back upon hearing Touji's calm and composed explanation, feeling like children who had been reprimanded by the teacher.

But Ohtomo stood in amazement.

"True identity? What's Natsume-kun's true identity?"

This time it was Harutora and the others who inadvertently glanced at each other.

"Sensei, did you really not know?"

Tenma asked in surprise. Ohtomo's expression became even stranger. But come to think of it, Ohtomo had been in the hospital until this morning. It wasn't so strange that this gossip that hadn't even spread to most of the teachers failed to reach him.

Tenma looked at Harutora and the others in confusion. Harutora and Natsume also traded embarrassed glances.

After silently urging the other to speak, it was Harutora who ended up stepping forward.

"Well..... Actually, Sensei....."

He couldn't speak in a businesslike tone like Touji, nor did he have the emotional sensitivity for others that Tenma did. Harutora stammered to find suitable words.

About one minute later.

Harutora’s group of five would never forget the stupid expression they saw on Ohtomo’s face for the rest of their lives.

He was too stupid. But that had indeed surpassed anything he imagined.

After hearing what Harutora said, Ohtomo was silent for a moment while staring unmovingly at Natsume. Natsume lowered her head, blushing slightly. Though he knew that staring was very rude, he couldn't avert his eyes.

It had been a few years since he had experienced a mind blowing shock like this. Once he learned the secret, he wondered why he hadn't noticed before he was informed - but he feared that he hadn't even thought of it once. He despaired at his own blindness.

But.....

That was a blind spot. Now he understood that the so-called second-class could be this powerful once one was caught.

".....My usual aura is disguised. I use Hokuto - my dragon's aura - with a magic my father created himself. Anyway, it has a very specific use and people who don't know about it definitely wouldn't be able to see through it."

Natsume's explanation was in a different manner of speech than usual. Though she wore a male uniform, she had otherwise completely been a 'girl'. Ohtomo didn't know how to respond.

"But, that's truly unexpected. We wouldn't have been surprised if Ohtomo-sensei had already noticed a long time ago."

".....Uh, I'm really sorry to fail your expectations. To be honest, you almost scared me to death. How could this be..... No, that's wrong. In short, I didn't notice....."

Ohtomo couldn't retaliate against Touji's somewhat amused comment.

In the first place, he 'looked' at the same time as he saw with his eyes when excellent practitioners were involved, and that had already become unconscious habit. However, vision would occasionally become a hindrance in magic battles. If he were asked which one to trust, spirit-seeing was more reliable than vision. With that, it was indeed hard to see through her false identity if she perfectly disguised her aura.

But that was just part of the reason Ohtomo hadn't been able to see through to Natsume's true identity.

Ohtomo had originally never suspected that Natsume would disguise her gender. He had never imagined such a thing at all. His thinking had never progressed in that direction. The reason for that probably was that the role of 'Tsuchimikado Natsume' was a 'special' existence among the students from the very start.

A normal student's disguise would have been seen through more easily. But if it were the next heir of the famous Tsuchimikado family, a few 'strange areas' could more or less be permitted with the attitude 'maybe he's just like that'. More importantly, Natsume was also rumored to be Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation. It was natural for her to be different from others.

Most importantly, if that Tsuchimikado had planned on concealing it until the end - if she had truly planned on fooling the people around her, she couldn't have made such a 'careless' disguise. It would have been a more perfect and complete method of deception. At least Onmyouji who knew the Tsuchimikados would believe so.

But Natsume's disguise had just been a covering of her aura and acting as a male, which was extremely crude in a certain sense. That was why Ohtomo had felt that it was 'very natural'. Other teachers were probably the same.

".....Well, you really got me."

Accidentally being that effective - was impossible. The plans had probably even accounted for this. Though it was unfortunate that he hadn't met him, Natsume's father Yasuzumi was undoubtedly quite a cunning and twisted person. Ohtomo couldn't help but imagine that.

This wasn't to fool the immature students, it was clearly a disguise completely outfitted to fool the professionals of the Onmyou Academy - the adults around her.

"......Incidentally, Natsume. Has the fact that you're a girl already spread?"

"Yeah. At least the students in our class all know. Other students too, probably. I'm not sure about the teachers."

"I, I see. ......Anyway, I understand. The fact that Natsume-kun's a girl was exposed, and hence Kyouko-kun felt estranged? Harutora-kun and Touji-kun knew already, right?"

"I also knew. The only two of our friends who didn't know were Kyouko and Glasses."

"I see. That's quite curious. It might be a bit terrible to say this, but in Kyouko-kun's eyes it's as if she were excluded....."

"......Also, there are some other reasons..... Kyouko always strongly believed that Natsume was a boy, and well....."

"Oh, oh. I see. Ambiguously intimate relationships and even this kind of delicate problem..... You all are sensitive youngsters, I guess..... Yeah....."

Ohtomo echoed his students with a mangled sentence.

In this kind of time, he poignantly felt how insufficient and powerless he was as an educator, not as an Onmyouji. Sleuthing and deception were the skills he was adept at, and he had confidence in his stealth magic, illusion magic, and bluffing second-class magic.

But being in front leading others without hiding or deceiving was a different matter altogether, and it wasn't something that could be compensated with techniques. He had to reflect on his ability as a teacher. He couldn't rely on cleverness. He had his own style as an 'adult'.

Come to think of it, Amami and the principal indeed had that kind of 'strength'. His current self couldn't be compared to them.

Ohtomo glanced at Natsume out of the corner of his eye.

In a daze, he asked:

".....When Kyouko-kun learned that you were a girl, what did she say?"

He reflected as he asked the question. Maybe he had been too blunt. Like he expected, Natsume was speechless and her expression seemed as if she were about to cry.

".....She said..... 'Liar'....."

".....I see."

He didn't need to hastily express his sympathy. For now, Ohtomo just responded in an emotionless tone.

At the same time, he thought calmly while trying to stay objective. If it were Kyouko..... If it were the girl Kurahashi Kyouko that Ohtomo knew, she would probably 'forgive' the other party when she learned that she had been tricked and understood that there had been no ill intent as well as a reason that it had to be concealed. But it would only be 'momentary'. It was just on the surface. The reason for that was that her personality emphasized 'harmony'. She put more priority on the feelings of those around her than on her own inner feelings. She would act for the people close to her, even by suppressing what she herself thought. She had that kind of gentle spirit of self-sacrifice.

But this time, Kyouko had said something like 'liar' to Natsume's face when she learned of Natsume's true identity.

Then..... This was actually a good disposition.

Kyouko didn't hesitate to violate her own principles and had expressed her true feelings. This reversal proved that Kyouko had completely accepted Natsume. To Kyouko, the relationship between her and Natsume - and by extension, her and Harutora - was important enough for her to betray her original nature, and forced her to act according to her true feelings. The best proof was that she hadn't been able to gloss it over with an excuse like 'you had no choice'.

In that case, wasn't that just tying more chains from Kyouko to Natsume and the others? Wasn't it because of the closeness of their relationship that they had gotten into a small conflict now?

Ohtomo analyzed calmly and objectively.

Then, he reached a conclusion. No problem. His analysis wouldn't be wrong.

"......Hey, Natsume-kun."

Ohtomo himself was also a bit flustered as he spoke to Natsume. Natsume pressed her lips together and listened to what Ohtomo had to say.

"Do you still remember what I said that evening during the day of the camp?"

Ohtomo watched Natsume's face, seeing from her expression that she still remembered that event well.

The practical skills training camp that they had held near Lake Yamanaka after they had advanced to the second year. That evening, Ohtomo had said to Natsume that the more she treasured her relationships, the more important it was to be honest with each other. Even if it would bring them trouble for the moment, they should still face each other honestly.

"Well, though I said that, it's actually very difficult. Normally, it would seem really brazen to bring trouble to someone else without hesitation and still want to convey your own thoughts."

"......Yeah."

"But, Natsume. I still believe this. Leaving at a suitable time and selfishly forcing others to accept your feelings might be crazy in some regard. But I still think that it definitely won't become an obstruction to convey your true feelings to the ones you want to treasure. Even if the outcome will be tragic, you should be patient and endure, get over some trouble, and finally finish things up happily. Human relationships are very misleading, right? Then, you can't take shortcuts. You have to handle them with your best effort....."

This lecture couldn't completely wash away the anxiety that had risen. Ohtomo couldn't easily assert that his suggestion was necessarily correct.

But even so, he had to tell them. The girl before him was even less mature than his immature self, and no matter what, she needed suggestions from someone more capable. She was seeking aid in her confusion.

Then, he could only guide her. He couldn't seem lacking in self-confidence. He had to believe in himself out of his own responsibility.

"Natsume-kun."

Ohtomo strengthened his tone. Natsume naturally straightened her back.

"Go find Kyouko-kun and apologize. Right away."

Maybe this was also Ohtomo teaching his 'past self'. Natsume's eyes heated up.

Then,

"...Yes."

A powerful reply. She rushed through the arena exit with all her energy.

"Natsume, I'll....." Harutora also wanted to chase after her, but he was stopped by Ohtomo grabbing his lapel.

"Wait until afterwards."

"But!"

"It's alright. You should stay behind."

Ohtomo didn't think that he was qualified to tell his students what to do like this. His plans might have consequences for Harutora and the others. Ohtomo had never experienced this kind of fear until now..... But he could only endure it. Believe and accept.

"Alright."

Ohtomo forced a smile. This was the first time smiling had been this tiring.

"For now, let's go make some charms for Harutora. What? They'll definitely be fine. Natsume and Kyouko can definitely reconcile."

Part 3

In the end, they hadn't been able to talk. Kyouko gloomily thought back over the day.

...Idiot, what am I even doing.....

After she had heard the news about the fire this morning, she had felt so deeply that she needed to go console Natsume, that she had to become Natsume's support. But before she realized it, school had ended before Kyouko had even spoken a word to Natsume.

One of the reasons was Takiko's arrival. In front of the naive, sincere attitude she showed Natsume and the others, Kyouko had inadvertently feared entering their conversation.

...Who exactly is that girl.....

The 'red-haired girl' they had spoken of once before. Though Takiko showed an extremely familiar attitude to Natsume and Harutora, they should have only met once. The two of them seemed to be very confused as well, but Takiko didn't care.

Moreover, Takiko didn't just recognize Natsume and Harutora, she even knew about Kyouko. It seemed like she had met Kyouko's father and heard about her from him. She had even been taken aback when Kyouko had given her name.

But Kyouko's father Kurahashi Genji could be called the leading figure in the modern magic community. A girl who was the same age as her, and of unknown background, had prior contact with her father. Her father was always very busy, and even Kyouko had few opportunities to speak with him.

...Who exactly is she?

After Takiko had attended the first class, she had ran off somewhere for some reason. But Kyouko hadn't been able to approach Natsume and the others after the first setback. How embarrassing. To think her resolve was only of this level. She couldn't help but grieve from the bottom of her heart.

Then, after school. Kyouko came to the emergency staircase of the academy building again, sitting alone in the staircase landing again.

"......Hah. What should I do....."

She was probably still hoping Suzuka would come. That was definitely it. She had originally thought she was so tough, but to think she was so unexpectedly weak. She still couldn't contact her grandmother, and Kyouko become alone for the first time in a while.

"......I really got what I deserved..... I guess."

She pointlessly blamed herself. Kyouko sighed deeply, resting her elbows on her knees and her chin on her hands.

If Suzuka came like yesterday, she would hear about Natsume and the others' situation. That way, maybe she would be able to muster the courage to talk to Natsume and the others again. Feeling like she was extremely selfish, Kyouko lowered her head into her hands while staring at the entrance to the emergency staircase.

Her worrying had probably led to mental and physical exhaustion, but this state of fuzzy consciousness was actually extremely soothing. Her mind was empty and she was relieved of her problems.

Suzuka would definitely come again today. It would be nice if she could. She hoped she would come.

Hurry, hurry.....

Hurry and come - Just as her mind called out the third time. The door to the emergency staircase opened. Her heart thudded as she looked at the person who came in, then she felt as if it had stopped beating.

It wasn't Suzuka.

Natsume panted roughly, a desperate resolve on her face. But she stopped moving once she saw Kyouko, as if she had been petrified while opening the door.

Time stopped for the two of them. No, that instant felt like an eternity. Maybe she would die from the lack of air and the lack of a pulse. That was how Kyouko felt.

But Natsume's expression tightened before Kyouko stopped breathing.

She walked resolutely into the emergency staircase and closed the door behind her. Kyouko unconsciously thought of fleeing, but whether by fortune or misfortune, she couldn't run since she was sitting on the stairs.

Then, Natsume faced the trapped Kyouko.

"Sorry."

She lowered her head deeply.

"I'm really sorry."

"....."

Natsume repeatedly apologized to the dumbfounded Kyouko, her voice overflowing with sincere emotions. This was the first time in her life that Kyouko had heard such emotional words.

...Ah.

It was Natsume.

It wasn't Natsume-kun, the girl in front of Kyouko was the 'Natsume' that she was familiar with. They had only been separated for a short while, but Kyouko felt like she hadn't seen Natsume for a long time.

"....."

Kyouko didn't reply at all, as if her entire body was paralyzed. She had to say something, she had to express something, but she couldn't even manage that much. She couldn't react to Natsume.

But, Natsume bravely looked up and stared straight into Kyouko's eyes.

"Kurahashi-san. You should know already, but I disguised myself as a male because of the Tsuchimikado main family 'tradition'."

She opened her mouth to explain honestly.

As expected, she felt pained to hear Natsume speak in a feminine manner. But even so, Natsume was Natsume. Like her impression just now, this girl was Natsume.

Kyouko motionlessly stared at Natsume. Natsume explained to Kyouko with all her might.

"I..... At least when I just entered the Onmyou Academy, I didn't seriously think about what would come of a life of fooling the people around me. But because it was 'family tradition', I naturally entered the academy while disguising myself as a male..... I thought that was enough. That way, I could conceal myself a little, so it was more liberating."

Liberating. When she heard that word, the tense Kyouko suddenly felt a pang of sympathy. She understood why she would feel liberated without it being needed to be said. Kyouko was from the Kurahashi family, and she had experienced the feelings of being immersed in the gazes of those around her as well as of being

viewed through tinted lenses. In addition, her personality of prioritizing the well-being of those around her had probably developed to comply with that kind of environment.

More importantly, Natsume had always been burdened with the rumors of being Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation.

Liberating. That was obvious. She had been too harsh on Natsume. Even if she had to disguise herself as a male and live as a different person, it would definitely be far more liberating.

"Since I was small, I always lived in the countryside where the main family residence was. I almost never came in contact with anyone other than my father. As for friends..... Harutora was the only childhood friend that I was close with. My relationship with Touji was pretty rough from the start. But I never imagined I would be able to make other friends. So..... So, going to the Onmyou Academy disguised as a boy was better for me. I was too accustomed to being distant."

Natsume continued speaking painfully. Kyouko held her breath, listening to Natsume's words and voice.

"So I also became reliant on being in a relaxing position with Kurahashi-san that I was close with and who fought together with me up till now. As a result, I didn't consider about how much pain it would cause for Kurahashi-san. I only finally realized what I did after Kurahashi-san called me a 'liar'. I've always been going too far and betraying you."

Natsume's feelings crept into her bitter, solemn voice. Kyouko felt the weight of every word.

"I'm not hoping that you'll forgive me. But, please..... allow me to apologize."

Then,

Sorry - Natsume continuously repeated that.

Natsume apologized awkwardly like a broken record, and hence it looked like she was fully expressing her foolishness without any deliberation or forethought. It wasn't an act, it was a sincere apology. It was a somewhat presumptuous apology.

Various thoughts and emotions raged like a storm in Kyouko's heart.

But unlike Natsume, they also included deliberation, forethought, and ugly selfishness among them. Friendship and envy. Hate and pity. Remorse and anxiety. Anger and pain. She couldn't completely control them, and her emotions exploded in a rage within her.

But Kyouko picked the purest, most primitive emotion from that.

She made her decision following that emotion.

"...Thank you, Natsume-kun."

Kyouko resolutely opened her mouth. "Eh?" Natsume gave a surprised response.

"Thank you for telling me Natsume-kun. Natsume-kun is braver than I am. If I were Natsume-kun, I definitely wouldn't be able to do what you did. After all, I'm only crouching over here because I was even scared of talking face-to-face."

Natsume had abandoned her 'refuge' and had bared her heart. Then, she should also abandon her 'refuge' and face Natsume. No matter what the outcome was.

"So."

Kyouko placed all her efforts into controlling the tremble within her voice.

"So, you also let me find the courage to say this. Natsume-kun..... you're playing dirty."

Natsume's expression froze as if she had choked when she heard that final word. But Kyouko was merciless and believed she was justified.

"Do you think that it'll be over if you apologize like that? That you'll be able to be 'liberated' from now on? You don't care about my feelings at all."

"Th-That's not true! I--!"

"No. You don't understand my feelings one bit. You definitely wouldn't be able to understand my feelings right now. But I don't plan on blaming you for that. After all, it's not your fault that you don't understand my feelings."

But, Kyouko continued to berate her. Before she realized it, she had even stood up.

"But, since Natsume-kun spoke honestly like this, I'll explain everything too. Please let me seriously speak about my feelings."

She walked down the stairs step by step, slowly closing the distance to Natsume. Her body trembled in fear and she teared up, but inexplicably, her heart became more and more excited.

"Hey, Natsume-kun. Do you know how much I was hurt because of your 'lie'? You've obviously noticed it too, right? I liked Natsume-kun. I won't let you pretend you didn't know - or that you had never noticed."

"......?"

Kyouko's unbridled words made Natsume blush. Her face was probably not much better either. But there was no retreating now. She couldn't conceal it or escape halfway.

"You say a lot of praiseworthy things. Then why don't you say them now? Why did you keep silent when you noticed my feelings? There were many opportunities to speak up, right? You could have put it straight without ever having to mention the

'family tradition', right? But in the end, you still left my feelings alone and had it easy on your own. Am I wrong?"

"That--!"

That wasn't true. Kyouko as well as Natsume should also be able to understand that. Even if there had been an opportunity to be frank, being unable to say such a thing was normal. The closer they were, the harder it was to tell a secret that would destroy that relationship. Even Kyouko, who blamed Natsume, could understand this.

Kyouko knew that her criticism of Natsume was unfair and unreasonable.

But she still had to blame her. She couldn't hold her anger. That was the truth in her heart.

Then, she didn't need to hide it anymore.

"It's fine if you think I don't matter. I can't help that! But please don't come here apologizing and pretending to be compassionate now. I won't force you to apologize! What else did you say? 'I'm not hoping that you'll forgive me', what a joke! If you really knew you were wrong, you should have asked for forgiveness no matter what, right? If you wanted to be forgiven, then you should have just clearly said so! When you say that it's fine even if I don't forgive you, you still don't care about my feelings in the end!"

She didn't need to be concerned about the flaws in her claims, and who cared about contradictions or the like. Kyouko bellowed like a wild beast. Her heart was filled with an intricate, crisscrossing chaos. She hurled her exposed feelings towards Natsume with all her might.

Natsume bit her lip but didn't move her gaze from Kyouko. Tears welled in her pure eyes, but she stared at Kyouko without even blinking.

"Kurahashi-san..... Kurahashi-san!"

She shouted with all her might while holding back her tears.

"I probably couldn't do anything about your misunderstandings. But I definitely care about your feelings. I couldn't possibly think that way! After all, you're my 'friend'! At least I think so. 'Friends' are irreplaceable existences to me! They're extremely important things! So I definitely don't think you don't matter!"

Natsume's voice was hoarse and interspersed with sniffles. She endured Kyouko's full-force scolding head-on.

"What does that mean? Also, if you want to apologize..... If you think you did something wrong, then how are you going to respond to my feelings? I don't want it to end with you apologizing by yourself, regretting, and then having that expression like everything's settled!"

"I'm not planning anything like that! I-I really want to make up with Kurahashi-san! Though we might not be able to recover our relationship from before. But I want to become Kurahashi-san's friend again, and I don't want to become separated from you. Because..... Because! I, I was extremely happy after meeting Kurahashi-san! Incredibly happy.....!"

The moment Natsume shouted this--

Rather than Natsume, Kyouko's tears broke the wall between them.

She stared at Natsume while crying. Natsume also looked teary-eyed at Kyouko. It was as if their dark, depressed feelings had all been washed away and their empty hearts had been instantly filled with gentle, fresh emotions.

Kyouko couldn't help but lament. Wasn't this like they had already made up? She had been so angry just now, so despaired, and extremely disgusted. Even now, she

hadn't been fully relieved of all of it. But her current self had completely accepted and 'forgiven' Natsume.

It was probably because she and Natsume were true 'friends'. It wasn't related to anything like gender. A couple lies couldn't shake it either. Once the tangled threads were pulled apart, they could return to how they were before.

Even if it wasn't love.

But this wasn't over yet. The girl Kurahashi Kyouko and the girl Tsuchimikado Natsume had returned to a friendly relationship, but there was still a very large problem.

Kyouko wiped her tears, breathing deeply - and smiling bitterly. Natsume looked dumbstruck at Kyouko's smile.

"......Natsume-kun. Do you know the reason I liked you before?"

"......Eh?"

Kyouko's sudden change in tone confused Natsume.

"I went to your home before when I was small and I played with a boy there. I started liking that boy because of it. That was my first love, I guess. I always, always admired that person."

"I-I met Kurahashi-san when I was small? B-But I don't remember it....."

Kyouko smiled emptily upon seeing Natsume's embarrassed appearance. How comical it was, now that she thought about it.

"Well yeah. After all, you were actually a girl. Though I didn't notice before..... that person wasn't you."

Several seconds of confusion.

Then, Natsume's face paled. Kyouko inadvertently laughed.

"......Right? And that idiot, I told him about everything about how I liked the boy I met before, but he didn't remember it at all. Don't you think that's terrible?"

"....."

Natsume was silent for a very long time. In the meantime, her body shivered as if she would crumble at any time, and then she nodded weakly. Kyouko made her decision, mustered her courage, and took the final step.

"Natsume-kun..... No, Natsume-san."

"....."

"Do you like Harutora?"

"....."

"If I said I still couldn't give up on my first love..... What would you do?'

"....."

Natsume shrank back.

After being exposed to this frightening twist, her heart felt as if it had been beaten black and blue. Kyouko, seeing her appearance, felt that it was already enough. She breathed out to relax and continued the conversation, as if she had been relieved from her worry.

"Natsume-san. Why don't you fight with me fair and square, with no regrets?"

Natsume's eyes widened.

Then,

"...Yeah."

She directly replied to Kyouko.

Kyouko looked at Natsume with narrowed eyes as if looking at something dazzling. How pure, how beautiful this was. She really couldn't hate Natsume. She had already become accustomed to this.

"Thanks."

Kyouko repeated her first words again.

"But..... Please promise me something. So that we can have a... 'fair' fight."

"......Yeah. What promise?"

Natsume listened seriously. Kyouko controlled her breathing again.

"Confess to Harutora about 'Hokuto-san'."

The shock to Natsume's heart showed on her face. The impact shook her to the core.

"......Why.....?"

She asked briefly, her body trembling. Her heart felt happy. Though it was a bit mischievous, she could accept this trade.

"If Natsume-san tells Harutora clearly about Hokuto-san..... that's the only way we can have a serious contest. That's the only way we can stand on the same starting line. Right?"

Kyouko spoke while reaching out her right hand.

She lightly made a fist, only sticking her pinky finger out.

This was the ritual for a promise.

An old, traditional magic.

Natsume stared at the extended pinky finger. Then, an intense light flashed through her eyes and she reached out her arm, twining her own pinky finger around Kyouko's.

Of course, she understood. This wasn't the start of a brand-new battle, but instead, it was the moment Kyouko's first love was ended. The final moment of her unrequited love that had lasted many years.

But she had no regrets. She felt that she had finally reached her destination, after many twists and turns. She was satisfied with this. It wasn't her vanity, nor was it a pretense, it was Kyouko's pure feelings.

She giggled. On the other hand, Natsume's expression was extremely complex, mixed with melancholy, relief, panic and joy as she stared at their linked pinky fingers. She was so serious that she looked like an idiot.

Just then,

"I, I understand, but..... Kurahashi-san."

"Hmm?"

"When is the deadline?"

She seriously asked. That wouldn't do. Kyouko wanted to laugh again.

She couldn't win against this kind of opponent.

".....Okay. Well, there happens to be a good opportunity."

"What is it?"

Natsume leaned forward anxiously. Kyouko's still tear-streaked face revealed a bright smile.

"Suzuka-chan wants to see the fireworks festival tomorrow. Isn't that the best opportunity to confess what you've hidden?"

Seeing his master return from the Onmyou Academy was really..... Yashamaru held back from smiling bitterly.

Takiko wasn't good at hiding her emotions in the first place, and it was even more evident this time. Though she herself was silent, remorse, sadness, and unpleasant anxiety still poured from her and diffused into the surroundings. To think so much emotion could spread from her small body. Perhaps he ought to say 'as expected of a shaman'.

This was a room in the Onmyou Agency building. It had originally been a room used to receive people, but basically no one used it now, so Takiko and the others used it to meet with Kurahashi.

Yashamaru opened the door to admit Takiko, casting a questioning gaze towards Kumomaru who followed behind their master. Kumomaru silently shook his head with a dour face.

Takiko didn't sit down after she entered the room either, standing in place with her head lowered. Yashamaru coughed deliberately upon seeing her like this.

"Ah..... Princess, did you run into some trouble at the Onmyou Academy?"

"....."

Takiko didn't reply. In the end, he didn't need to confirm everything bit by bit. He could practically understand everything that had happened with one glance at Takiko's appearance. Her excited appearance today morning seemed like a distant memory. He now understood Kurahashi's worries.

He was also able to guess what exactly had happened to a certain degree.

"Princess. Didn't I say? Even if you meet Tsuchimikado Natsume right now, you won't get anything."

Even if he spoke to her like he was lecturing a small child, Takiko didn't look over. Yashamaru sighed at Kumomaru.

He indifferently left the princess's side and whispered to Kumomaru.

"......Did they fight? Or was she unable to get along with them?"

"......They had a magic battle."

"What?"

"It was just a mock battle underground. The princess requested a contest."

Yashamaru sighed deeply again upon hearing Kumomaru's explanation.

"Don't scare me, Mutobe - I mean, Kumomaru. If she's this depressed, could it be that she lost? In that case, Tsuchimikado Natsume's power is quite incredible. It seems that it wasn't due to luck that he defeated 'Higekiri'--"

"No, the princess dominated the competition itself. But, well..... The princess got a bit emotional and they quarreled....."

"Ah, well. So that's how it ended up."

Yashamaru glanced at Takiko over his shoulder. His eyes, one underneath a monocle, looked like those of a shogun who was troubled by his impulsive daughter.

Just then,

"......Yashamaru."

Takiko called out in a stiff voice, still with her head lowered and her back to him.

"I..... Am I really the same as the Yakou believers that I hate? Whatever I say, I still have expectations of Tsuchimikado Yakou. At least I hope that he can awaken as soon as possible. I hope that he can awaken and regain his past consciousness. In that sense, what's different between me and the people who blindly worship him?"

Yashamaru silently thought for a moment about the question his master posed.

"That's not right."

He asserted this.

Takiko turned around. Yashamaru smiled lightly.

"First, our goal isn't Tsuchimikado Yakou himself. More importantly, we have no intent to deify or worship him. Even if you wish for Yakou to awaken like they do, the nature of your desire is completely different from those of the Yakou believers, Princess. Princess, you don't want 'Tsuchimikado Yakou', you want a 'friend'. A companion that you can move forward with and open your heart to."

"....."

Takiko didn't reply, but her expression more or less regained some spirit. Kumomaru heaved a small sigh of relief from next to Yashamaru.

But,

"However, Princess. There's something you have to pay attention to. Will the awakened Tsuchimikado Yakou be the companion you anticipate?"

"What does that mean?"

"There's no way to check now what kind of magic Yakou used when he reincarnated himself. Yakou's reincarnation might not have the same will as the him from before. Please be sure to pay attention to that point."

"....."

The shikigami's teacher-like warning made Takiko press her lips together in dejection again. Yashamaru couldn't help but feel bitter when he saw his master's attitude. But this was a bitter lesson in order to help her in the future. He lowered his head slightly and reached out his right hand.

His white-gloved palm pointed to the interior of the room, as if telling her that dinner had already been prepared.

With her brow wrinkled, Takiko quickly looked into the room where Yashamaru pointed and finally noticed it. There was a tall, wrapped wooden box placed on the table in the corner of the room.

To the stunned Takiko:

"Miyachi-kun returned not long ago. He brought that."

Yashamaru announced this, and Takiko also understood what 'that' was. Her face suddenly brightened and she ran next to the wooden box.

"This! This is the 'Raven's Wing'?"

His master turned her head to confirm and Yashamaru slowly nodded. Takiko smiled, as naive as a child - overjoyed after obtaining the toy she longed for.

"Yashamaru. You said that Natsume might not have the same will as Yakou."

"Yes."

"There's no need to worry about that. Natsume will definitely become my companion. That's obvious!"

".....I also hope so."

The shikigami avoided any certain words, but his master didn't care, carefully putting her hands on the wooden box and narrowing her eyes as if having a good dream.

"This is great. This way we'll definitely succeed. Next time, everything....."

Kumomaru turned apprehensively towards Yashamaru as he watched Takiko. Yashamaru spread his arms slightly, shrugging without a word.

A well-frequented bar required three things. Darkness, space, and a suitable clamor.

But he hadn't had the time to drink leisurely since the Meguro incident. After being 'spotted' so clearly, it was difficult for even him to move freely for a period of time.

But unexpectedly, the Onmyou Agency hadn't reacted according to his predictions after seeing him. No matter how he looked at it, the Onmyou Agency didn't intend to pursue him. The Exorcist Bureau had been damaged, and in addition, chaos that couldn't be seen from the outside seemed to have even broken out among the Mystical Investigators, the core of the Onmyou Agency organization.

Of course, he didn't know about the Onmyou Agency's chaos, but if he ran into the roving Mystical Investigators on a search, all he needed to do was turn tail and run.

Hence, he went to the bar he frequented, staying 'moderately alert'.

He didn't think he would get ambushed.

"I didn't think it would be so easy to find you either."

"Really."

"Before, I thought that you were quite the free spirit."

"It's a bit irritating to be told that by you."

There were very few people who could talk this boldly to his face and still maintain their composure. The person currently sitting in front of him was one of those people.

The two of them created a stark contrast.

He was a huge man.

He was close to two meters tall, covered in muscle and filled the room with his presence. But his outfit of a suit without a tie made him feel trendy. His short golden hair and chiselled face made him resemble a foreign god who had possessed one of its statues and appeared in the human world.

In comparison, the other person was tiny girl.

Based on her external appearance, she was probably only in middle school, and it probably wouldn't be wrong to see her as an elementary schooler. Her pretty face had a sort of dreamlike quality - More specifically, her expression seemed as if she wasn't fully awake. This person looked like a delicate western doll given life and who had no interest at all in joining human society.

"To think you could enter this bar looking like that."

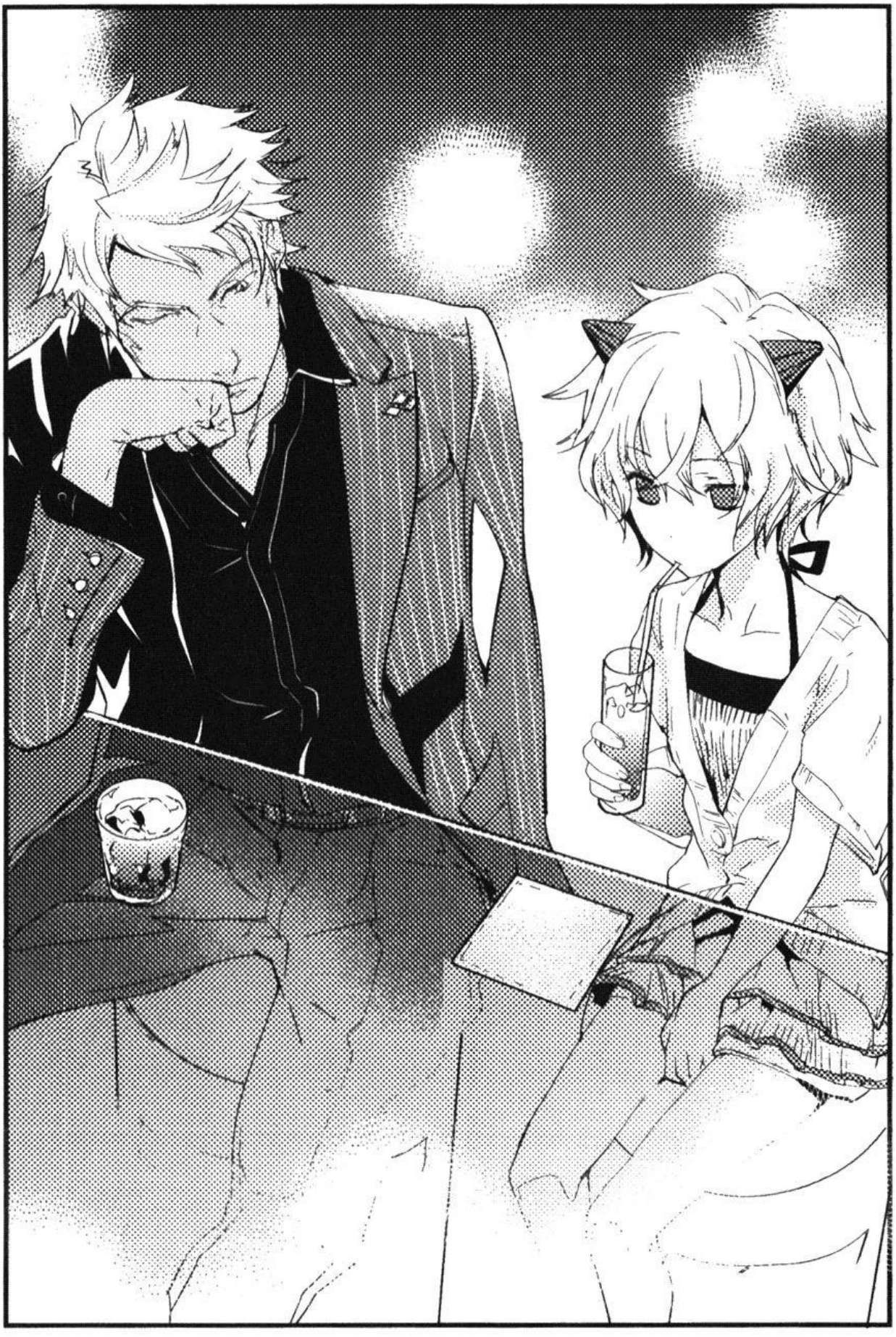
"Anyone with good vision can see my mature charm at a glance."

"Come to think of it, you're only very skilled at stealth."

"....."

The girl didn't give any particular rebuttal, putting her mouth on the straw in the glass cup on the table and sighing. It was a mystery how she had ordered a drink

while concealed, but unfortunately he didn't have any interest in that little trick at all.



"......So."

She asked straightforwardly while gesturing an order to the bartender.

"Doman's messenger, huh. So? Is he already used to his 'new body'?"

"No. Well, yes and no."

The girl's expression didn't change as she gave a confusing reply. She rarely showed such a scornful attitude, even to her master. The giant man's expression momentarily became somewhat restless, and he raised an eyebrow.

From before, the man hadn't been very outspoken. He silently watched the girl.

Then, the girl flatly said:

"First, I'm not the Priest's messenger. I've already left his side."

"What?"

"Also, the Priest is already used to his new substitute. I'm still very dissatisfied."

"....."

The man ordered a scotch whisky. After waiting for the bartender to leave, the man slowly took a gulp.

"......So?"

He looked into the girl's eyes and repeated his question. This time, the girl didn't joke around.

"This time it's for myself. I have something to tell you."

"Say it."

"The Twin-Horned Syndicate has obtained the 'Raven's Wing'. More accurately, it's not the Twin-Horned Syndicate, but rather the people manipulating them from the shadows."

Outrage flickered through the man's narrowed eyes. Anyone who had the spirit-seeing ability might be able to notice the man’s slightly abnormal aura that swayed as it spilled out.

It was an intense and ancient demonic aura.

The man didn't say any more, he just urged her on with his gaze. The girl didn't repeat her explanation either.

"Are you fine with that?"

"......There's no reason for me to step in. Rather, it should proceed naturally."

"You're obviously very concerned."

"Shut up."

The man tilted his cup with a brisk motion. The girl kept observing the man.

"Proceed naturally? I can't understand. His condition right now is very bad."

"......Condition?"

The girl's expression didn't change a bit after she heard the man reply. But the voice she asked "You haven't seen?" with seemed to be a bit surprised.

"Didn't you deliberately go to the Meguro branch to observe?"

"At the time, the 'Ogre Eater' interrupted me halfway--"

The man hadn't finished speaking. His gaze became even sharper, seeming to understand 'whose' condition the girl was speaking of.

"What happened? How is that person right now?"

The man's attitude as he asked this was as if he had realized that the girl was right. He was also a bit surprised. It seemed that his heart really was 'concerned', no matter what his mouth said.

"Why don't you go 'see' with your own eyes."

The girl coldly answered the man's question.

She expressionlessly put her mouth back on the straw, sipping the cocktail.

The ice cubes in the glass made a crisp note.

Chapter 4 - Revelation

Part 1

She had entered this cafe near Shibuya Station to pass the time until their meeting. But now it was already past the time of their meeting, yet Natsume still didn't dare walk out. She had received the messages that Harutora had arrived in Tokyo and Shibuya Station, and it had already been ten minutes since then. The more she checked, the more restless she got, and hence she didn't even dare look at the time. Even so, her heart was about to burst from tension.

She walked into the bathroom again, which made enough times that she had lost count, and checked her appearance in the mirror.

She had already gotten completely used to dressing in the Onmyou Academy uniform in half a year's time. The black male uniform. She was probably already quite practiced with male actions.

But, no matter how familiar her normal life was, this was her first time appearing before Harutora with a male appearance. He had already heard about the 'family tradition' business, but what would he think when he actually saw her do this? Also, what attitude should she take towards him? Though she had already rehearsed it several times in her mind these past few days, she still hadn't found an answer now that the time came. Why was she so weak when it came to the crucial moment?

But, Natsume wouldn't be this nervous if it were just wearing a male disguise. There was another problem.

The pink ribbon tied to her black hair.

"....."

She stared at the ribbon in the mirror, and her originally throbbing heartbeat seemed to become even more intense.

When Hokuto's shikigami charm - when the magic she had added to and reinforced with magic to constantly improve had been revealed, why hadn't she confessed Hokuto's true identity on the spot? She didn't need to explain the magic in detail, but why had she casually avoided explaining this important matter? It was no good for her to blame her past self, but she truly felt extreme regret when she faced her weakness and shamefulness from back then. She had indeed spent many sleepless nights troubled by her guilt.

But.....

She couldn't continue running away.

This time, she would definitely make Harutora understand clearly.

How would Harutora react? How would he see her, who had hidden herself in the shikigami?

Maybe that would produce discord. It was possible that he would be mad or that she would be hated. How frightening. They had finally managed to mend the relationship between the two of them, and the possibility that it might be destroyed again frightened her so much that she trembled.

But.....

She really couldn't keep running away. Moreover, she couldn't escape anyway.

Natsume slowly exhaled and inhaled, calming her mind with deep breaths.

It would be fine to keep acting like Hokuto. She would be sincere and straightforward just like those times.

So, Natsume finally made her decision and left her seat. She paid the bill and exited the cafe. She walked towards the station. She was about to arrive at the designated meeting place.

It was the fateful moment she had anticipated, but Natsume still fearlessly advanced.

According to the weather forecast, there was zero chance of precipitation that day, and the sunny day would last until the evening.

It was a good day for a fireworks festival.

"Wearing a yukata..... will be very embarrassing."

"I, I guess. Since everyone's going together."

The cafeteria of the Onmyou Academy male dorm. Because it was a holiday, there were no other students around. Harutora and Natsume passed the time alone, bored.

The clock hung on the wall would be pointing to noon soon. The sun that shone through the window was almost to its zenith. Looking from the air-conditioned cafeteria out of the window felt as if the world had been painted pure white with light.

".....But, that was really sudden. I never thought you would run off somewhere after school yesterday..... or that when you came back you would propose that we go to see fireworks the next day. What kind of development is that."

Harutora sighed from his heart. To be honest, he had expected a tragic outcome. He never thought that it would be a fireworks festival. Perhaps this was what was called a miracle.

But, though his words were those of complaint, Harutora's voice was extremely cheerful. In any case, Kyouko and Natsume had made up slightly after talking. This was probably the feeling of getting a weight off his mind.

"I didn't think this would happen before I spoke with Kurahashi-san either."

"What? Well after all, we didn't really see her for the whole day yesterday. I wonder what you talked about to make things become like this."

"If you ask that..... it's probably a heart to heart."

"A heart to heart?"

"We talked honestly."

He had asked her yesterday once, but Natsume hadn't told him anything concrete at all. Well, if the positions were reversed, Harutora would probably also have trouble explaining, so he didn't push the question.

Though Ohtomo had driven them on at the time, she had faced Kyouko, the two of them had spoken honestly, and then they had finally worked hard to reach an understanding. That was quite incredible. If he were asked whether he could do the same thing, he wouldn't have that confidence at all. The impression of a heroic sacrifice would be the only thing to emerge in his mind.

".....Natsume, you're pretty amazing."

"Eh? What... are you talking about?"

"Yeah, in a lot of areas."

It wasn't just Natsume. Kyouko was also very magnanimous. She had probably suffered a larger shock than Harutora could imagine when she had learned of Natsume's true identity. But in the end, Kyouko still hadn't run away, but had spoken face-to-face with Natsume who came to her. 'Be honest' was very simple to say, but in that kind of situation it truly required an enormous amount of courage to share one's true feelings.

Though he didn't know whether this word was suitable,

...The two of them were both 'outstanding'.

But speaking of making up, it seemed that they still hadn't returned to before, and there was still a bit of a distance left between the two of them. He could understand that just by looking at Natsume's appearance. Natsume's behaviour had been stiff ever since she returned yesterday after speaking with Kyouko. Though she had expressed happiness about the talks being successful and about their promise to see the fireworks together, that seemed to be all. Harutora became even more curious about what exactly the two of them had talked about.

But even if there were still some problems left, Natsume's mood had clearly improved since yesterday. So, this was enough. It would be enough if from now on, the true Natsume - not her male persona - slowly advanced her relationship with Kyouko.

...Then, I'm up next.

Natsume had finished talking with Kyouko and had made up. But Harutora still hadn't. The incident from his childhood had been brought before him, but he hadn't taken a single step to address it. Outside of the relationship between Natsume and Kyouko, the relationship between Harutora and Kyouko still had other problems.

...But, Kyouko will come to watch the fireworks today too.

That meant that Kyouko would see Harutora. When Harutora was stalled and indecisive, the other party had taken a step towards him - no, just half a step. Then he had to respond.

...How nerve-wracking.

"......Hey, Natsume. The fireworks festival here should be packed, right? Maybe there will be even more people than in Shibuya on a weekend."

"But the scale definitely can't compare to the countryside, right? This is my first time watching them at the Sumida River too. The farthest I've traveled is Akihabara."

"I, Is that so. I've never gone either....."

Harutora wanted to use the light chatter to distract himself, but he wasn't able to have a proper conversation with Natsume. Actually, he had felt this ever since yesterday. Natsume's actions were awkward, and she seemed to be distracted. What exactly had she talked about with Kyouko yesterday?

Incidentally, it had been Suzuka's proposal to see the fireworks festival, not Kyouko's. Though the person in question had strongly denied it, messages about the meeting place is here and absolutely don't be late had been arriving nonstop since the morning.

Come to think of it, the first time he met Suzuka had also been at a summer fireworks festival.

"......But, we didn't have time to watch the fireworks during last year's festival....."

Suzuka had suddenly shown up and fought a magic battle against the Mystical Investigators. An unexpected first kiss. A tearful, shocking confession. That night's events instantly returned into focus as if Harutora were daydreaming.

That night was undoubtedly an important turning point in Harutora's life. A dangerous night that had changed his life.

"......How nostalgic."

Harutora sighed emotionally, looking back on the year.

Then, he suddenly turned to Natsume who sat next to him.

Natsume - for some reason - was staring at Harutora with a blush on her face.

It wasn't at the level of a slight red tinge, but rather she was red down to her neck. The eyes staring at Harutora were very moist and warm. Harutora couldn't help but stop breathing when he saw Natsume like that, his face reddening as well.

"......Wh, What is it, Natsume?"

"What are you asking about?"

"Uh, because."

"What? I didn't do anything."

"......I ......Is that so?"

Harutora stopped talking after seeing Natsume inexplicably tense up.

As for the Sumida River fireworks festival planned for today, Touji was researching the area online. Also, it seemed that Tenma, who was going with them, had gone before, so they probably didn't need to worry.

But,

"......Ah, right. Sorry, Natsume. Please don't forget to bring the magical charms Ohtomo-sensei made for me."

Natsume finally came to her senses when Harutora warned her about this as a precaution.

"Of course. I have them on me right now."

As she said this, Natsume took out a hand-crafted charm from her pocket. It was a charm that Ohtomo had prepared for Harutora yesterday after the mock battle after school had ended.

"Harutora-kun, is your aura still unstable like before?"

"Well, yeah. I should be able to get through it. This is actually decent training for aura usage."

"You sound very optimistic when you say that..... But, the current situation isn't good at all. Please don't force yourself. .....And Kon, tell me immediately as soon as you feel that Harutora-kun's condition is slightly off."

Natsume warned Kon as well as Harutora. Kon wouldn't respond to an order from someone other than her master, but this time Harutora felt the presence of her nodding in agreement.

"But like Ohtomo-sensei says, we can't resolve the fundamental problem by using Sensei's charms. We definitely have to think of some way to get in touch with Uncle and ask him to perform a detailed examination....."

What Natsume said was right. Harutora's current condition had to be diagnosed as soon as possible.

But, an entire day had passed since the news of the fire, and they still had no way of contacting Natsume's father or Harutora's parents. No new information had come from the police or the Onmyou Agency either. The peculiarities of the current situation even misled some people to believe that it had been a simple natural fire.

"......Hey, Natsume. What do you think of Takiko's explanation yesterday?"

"The information that the Onmyou Agency was behind of the fire? ......To be honest, I don't understand it."

The Onmyou Agency had attacked the Tsuchimikado family - though those words had come from Touji, not Takiko, it sounded like that was what she had meant. What exactly was going on? Why did the Onmyou Agency want to attack the Tsuchimikado family?

Though the Tsuchimikado family had already declined, it had once been a prominent Onmyoudou family. In addition, the current leader of the Onmyou Agency was the head of the Kurahashi family. And the Tsuchimikado family had once been the masters of the Kurahashi family. If they hadn't heard the news of the fire first-hand, they would have treated the information Takiko revealed as insane ravings.

"......Could it be that they have some connection with Yakou that they hid from us....."

"How could that be..... I don't believe it. After all, well. Even if they did have some connection to Yakou, don't you think it's a bit strange that they ignored you and acted directly against our families?"

In the end, they couldn't completely accept the information Takiko had given without knowing anything about Takiko's background. If they heedlessly trusted her, it might bring them unnecessary trouble. In the case, they could only find solace in the message 'we're safe' that his father had sent. In the end, they could only trust that message for now and continue waiting for contact.

But it was truly strange that there still wasn't any information after an entire day. 'Something' had definitely happened to his father.

...What the hell happened?

Takiko had appeared before Harutora and the others, which itself seemed to be an omen. Could it be that there was something going on right now? Quietly but steadily, with Harutora and the others being the only ones unaware, and now.....

".....I wonder what's going to happen."

Natsume's true feelings leaked out. Harutora inadvertently looked at her.

Her lonely face looked like she was worrying over vague anxieties. She was pretending not to care on the surface, but she gave off quite a pitiful impression. Like someone lost in the fog, or lost alone a crowd..... Harutora felt his chest tighten.

".....Hey, Natsume."

"Hmm?"

Natsume looked at Harutora sincerely, as affectionate and naive as a child trusting his parents. Heat rose in Harutora's body when he felt that casual, familiar gaze.

If he wanted to clear away Natsume's anxiety, then perhaps there was only one way.

Harutora pondered over those thoughts and was momentarily about to open his mouth.

But,

...Huh?

He focused his mind. Just then, Harutora suddenly felt a mysterious 'wrongness'.

It was a very subtle wrongness - no, it was a 'gaze'. The feeling that 'someone's staring at me'. A 'consciousness' subtle enough that he normally wouldn't notice. But the current Harutora couldn't ignore this kind of feeling.

His attention unconsciously turned towards that feeling.

A gaze. Someone was conscious of him. Watching him right now. No--

Was he observing?

...Outside.

Before he realized it, he had suddenly stood up from the seat. "Harutora-kun?" Natsume spoke, surprised. But Harutora didn't respond to Natsume, looking out of the window with a bewitched gaze.

But his gaze focused on the distance outside.

"......Someone's there."

"Eh?"

Natsume asked, dazed, and followed Harutora's gaze in her confusion. Just then, Harutora's body moved by itself.

He kicked back the chair and ran out. He sprinted from the cafeteria into the corridor, leaving Natsume behind with her confusion. Then, he left the dorm through the entrance.

The summer heat suddenly assaulted him and sunlight filled his vision. The sound of cicadas came from afar. Harutora's consciousness focused on the 'gaze' he had noticed just now.

...It's not just one person. There's someone else!

Then, after he ran out of the dorm, Harutora noticed something other than a gaze.

Magical energy. Magic had been set up. That magic was being used to - monitor the dorm.

"Kon!"

Kon materialized according to her master's wishes. Her small face bore a sharp look, as she rushed out before Harutora. Then, Harutora noticed the trace gradually

thinning, disappearing in the blink of an eye. Stealth magic. He realized that Harutora had noticed him. Harutora inadvertently clicked his tongue.

"Kon! Don't let him escape!"

He ran in the other direction at the same time he issued an order to his shikigami. They split up, each chasing one of the movements that he had noticed before. But the opponents had already hidden their trail with stealth. They had probably moved as they chased after them.

What should he do?

His hands moved by reflex, pulling out a wood-element charm from the charm box tied to his waist.

"Scatter! Order!"

He used the charm, whose magic had been modified. The charm was immersed in Harutora's magical energy and released a blinding light. Then, before the light had dispersed, it became a gust of wind. The brilliant wind blew across the road in a flash, instantly sweeping over the area that Harutora indicated.

Then,

"Ah!"

The stealth magic had been slightly disrupted. As expected, he was still there. A man dressed in a suit and pants, with a coat he had taken off under his arm. This man had been using magic to monitor the dorm just now.

"Hey you, what are you doing!"

He took out the next charm as he roared. It was also a wood-element charm. He would capture him for now. But the opponent was also a practitioner, so he couldn't

be careless. Harutora immediately planned his tactics, unleashing the magic that emerged in his mind.

"Order!"

He shouted and released the charm.

But in that moment. The magical energy he infused into the charm unintentionally overloaded.

His output surged uncontrollably. The giant aura in his body swelled up in a flash, as if it were trying to lift his body itself.

...This was bad!

His magical energy was going out of control. The intense magical energy flowed into the magic, and the charm suddenly burned when it left his fingers. Vines extended everywhere with the force of an explosion. Harutora, who was right next to it, was quickly engulfed.

"Damn!"

He frantically tried to control it, but he couldn't. The magical energy output caused a huge pressure that was difficult for him to intervene with. The man, who had released the stealth magic, turned to look over, stunned. Then, coming to his senses, he ran away. Harutora didn't even have the leisure to shout at the opponent.

The vines wound around Harutora, pressing him against the ground. How disastrous, to be attacked by his own magic. His output of magical energy still didn't stop in that period of time, and his aura continued to increase.

"H-Harutora-sama!"

Kon had observed her master's abnormal condition and had abandoned her chase to return to Harutora's side.

She swung Kachiwari's blade to cut the vines covering Harutora. Though the out-of-control magical energy also flowed to his shikigami Kon, if she used foxfire right now, she would risk harming Harutora due to using too much power. But even though Kon did her best to swing her wakizashi, the speed at which she cut couldn’t match the rate of the vines' growth. The surrounding road had already been covered in creeping vines, like a spiritual disaster.

Because of the huge magical energy he had suddenly released, Harutora's mind began to lose focus, as if his brain were deprived of oxygen. "Harutora-sama!" Kon shouted. But never mind replying, it was becoming harder and harder for him to even hear her clearly.

...Damn.....Natsume!

Harutora cried amidst his slowly fading consciousness.

Just then. The click of a tongue sounded from somewhere.

".....No choice. I'll help you this time."

A very reliable male voice.

Finally, Harutora lost consciousness.

◎

Natsume left the cafeteria in a daze, chasing after Harutora who had suddenly run away. But she finally realized when she reached the entrance.

Harutora's magical energy had exploded.

It was extremely abnormal. The unrestrained release of magical energy could only be described as an explosion. Her face instantly paled because of his runaway aura.

"Harutora-kun!"

She frantically rushed over. She wasn't far, so she would be able to get there soon. Over there, around the corner. Natsume reached for Ohtomo's charm that she had just taken out to show Harutora.

But right before Natsume turned the corner, a strong aura appeared on the other side.

It was different from Harutora's aura. No - it was more like miasma.

Demonic aura.

"What!?"

She froze and goosebumps rose over her body.

She had already gotten used to demonic aura ever since Touji had been able to control his living spirit power. But the demonic aura she felt this time definitely wasn't something Touji could compare to. It was Natsume's first time experiencing such a strong intensity and presence. An overwhelming 'strength'. Her instincts howled in terror.

But - the demonic aura, which appeared to be swelling, vanished in the next moment as if it had been crushed. Natsume held her breath, quickly moving the legs that had stopped for a moment and turning the corner.

The first thing she saw was Harutora lying on the road and Kon next to him.

Harutora had lost consciousness. There were still traces of turbulent, chaotic aura in the surroundings. But the output of magical energy seemed to have stopped already. His spiritual power was depleted because of his sudden release of magical energy. Though the situation wasn't good, he was safe for now.

On the other hand, Kon crouched next to Harutora, and upon closer inspection, she seemed to be shielding her master rather than supporting him. Her right hand gripped her wakizashi and the hair on her tail was erect. She stared at a man in the distance who stood on the other side of the road.

The instant she glanced at this man, Natsume shrank back in fright again.

A giant man. He was tall enough to rival Shaver, maybe even taller. But compared to Shaver's thin body, this man's was tempered and burly. His rough Western suit outfit was also very striking, and couldn't hide the wild nature inside. His short golden hair was like a crown in the sunlight.

The demonic aura from just now had come from this man. Natsume had that kind of doubtless instinct.

An oni.

He wasn't a manmade shikigami, but rather a true oni.

Why was he here?

"...Hey."

The man abruptly spoke. With just that, Natsume almost fell down from her tension.

"What's up with that curse?"

"......Eh?"

Natsume didn't understand the man's words for a while and didn't even know who the man was talking to. Was he talking to the unconscious Harutora, the embattled Kon, or her, who had rushed over?

"He became like this because it wasn't completely removed."

"....."

The man spoke coldly again. Natsume was overwhelmed by him and couldn't reply. Kon's fighting spirit was blazing, and her expression seemed to say that this wasn't the time to talk about such things. She was determined to protect her master to the death without looking after her own safety, fitting of her identity as a defensive shikigami.

In any case, Natsume was in a stance, prepared to summon Hokuto at any time and simultaneously racking her brain. The highest priority was to escape this place with Harutora. But even if she fled, it would probably be hard to escape. She couldn't act recklessly before she understood the reason this oni had appeared here.

Harutora's going out of control could very likely caused by this oni here. But Natsume had felt the demonic aura after Harutora's aura went out of control. Moreover, he had appeared the moment Harutora's condition reached the most dangerous level - then, Harutora had stopped going out of control. Could it be that this oni had stopped Harutora? But why, exactly?

The surroundings were filled with a simmering silence, and even breathing felt difficult.

Not long afterwards,

"The 'Raven's Wing' has activated."

"......Eh?"

"It can't be worn right now. It's risky."

What was he saying? Natsume was confused and didn't understand. But Natsume finally noticed that the man had no animosity. Though Kon hadn't lowered her guard, Natsume felt that he wasn't an 'enemy'.

"......What's going on?"

She asked cautiously.

But the man didn't reply. As if he had already finished his business, he quietly spun around and indifferently turned his back to Natsume.

Then, Natsume couldn't help but gasp as she finally realized. The man's jacket. The sleeve of his left arm didn't have any thickness and the cloth just slowly swayed along with the man's movements.

One arm. In other words - a one-armed oni.

Could it be? Natsume's eyes widened and her breath caught.

The man suddenly stopped.

"......Ask Saotome Suzu for help if there's an emergency. Though I don't really recommend it."

After looking over his shoulder and leaving those words, the man truly left.

Natsume's entire body was paralyzed for a while and she remained frozen. Then, she waited for the man leave. Only after the demonic aura faded completely did she bolt to Harutora's side.

She checked his condition. As expected, although his aura was very weak, it had already stabilized. With this, there wouldn't be a problem even if she didn't use Ohtomo's charm.

The words the man said and the swaying left sleeve churned into an ominous swirl in her mind.

But for now, Natsume pushed them out of her mind, and together with Kon, brought Harutora back into the dorm.

Part 2

She hadn't worn a yukata since she was a child. Kyouko let her mother, who was rarely at home, help put hers on while looking at herself in the mirror a bit bashfully.

Kyouko's mother wasn't an Onmyouji, but she had to support her husband and family in many areas as a Kurahashi family member. Moreover, she herself was quite cultured, with hobbies of tea ceremonies and flower arrangement, and often wore kimonos. Of course, helping another put on a yukata was quite trivial for her. With that, maybe she would complain 'you have to do this kind of thing yourself' contrary to their original agreement, but since she had already agreed to help put it on, there wasn't anything else she could say.

Once the preparation work was finished, she sighed and checked the time. They would meet in the evening, and there was still a lot of time. But once she became idle, she couldn't help but think about what she could forget when she was preparing.

The conversation with Natsume yesterday after school.

Also, she was going to see Harutora soon.

She inadvertently smiled wryly.

"......I went a bit overboard yesterday."

She hadn't professed her emotions like that for a long time. Her face inadvertently reddened when she recalled it.

Of course, she wouldn't regret. It was extremely relieving to let out the feelings she had always hidden. It was great that she had been able to do her best and talk seriously. She truly thought so. Though her relationship with Natsume hadn't returned to what it was before, they could at least start anew.

But, although she could end the business with Natsume with minimal embarrassment, the problem was Harutora. Unfortunately, the problem there was still extremely complex. Moreover, it might become even more embarrassing after her relationship with Natsume was successfully restored.

...Uh oh. I should've kept quiet about the past if this things were going to turn out like this.....

But at the time, she had said it because she had to, and there was no helping it now. She could only face Harutora directly like how she had dealt with Natsume yesterday. Even if the relationship between the two of them became even more complicated because of it, it definitely wouldn't 'break'. Yesterday's experience had given Kyouko this confidence.

".....Well, but, it's really embarrassing....."

She couldn't calm down no matter what she did. What was Harutora feeling right now? She at least hoped that he was as nervous as she was.

Her mother who had helped her put on her yukata returned as she was inadvertently grimacing into the mirror.

An Onmyou Academy student had called her home. Kyouko unconsciously asked back "For me?". After all, someone she knew would directly call her cell phone. She couldn't think of a student who would call her home phone.

"Is it really a student?"

"Who knows. But her voice sounds like a young girl's. But her manner of speech is like a boy's."

She instantly thought of Natsume when she heard that, but she knew Kyouko's phone number. Even if her cell phone was broken, she could borrow Harutora's or Touji's, so she wouldn't have to deliberately call her home's landline.

Kyouko walked out of the room in wonder, coming to the room that the phone was in.

She lifted the earpiece out of its cradle:

".....H-Hello?"

She greeted.

Then,

"Kyouko? Sorry for bothering you so suddenly. I'm Souma Takiko, we talked yesterday."

"Ah."

In her surprise, Kyouko replied that she still remembered her. Come to think of it, Takiko had once said that she had connections to her father. Even if she didn't know Kyouko's cell phone number, it wouldn't be strange for her to know their family's number.

But,

"What is it? Do you need something?"

She had first met Takiko yesterday in the corridor and brought her to the classroom, talking about classes the whole way. They had introduced themselves to each other too. But they had just stated their names. She seemed to know about Kyouko from her father, but Kyouko knew nothing about her origins.

Doubts that she couldn't banish arose in Kyouko. "Actually....." Takiko spoke as if she had something difficult to say.

"I had a bit of a disagreement with Natsume and the others yesterday..... Well..... We fought in the end. I didn't mean to originally. But for various reasons, and because it was a bad time..... I became pretty emotional. I'm already regretting it."

"A fight....."

Kyouko's eyes widened.

Now that she mentioned yesterday, Kyouko and Natsume had had a bickering that could be called a fight. In other words, if what Takiko said was true, then Natsume had clashed with Takiko as well as Kyouko.

Moreover, unlike Kyouko, Takiko's fight with Natsume hadn't gone smoothly.

"What happened?"

"Sorry. I can't say any details. I think I was responsible. But, it's wrong that we're quarrelling like this. I..... I want to be friends with Natsume and the others. I was hoping we could talk calmly again."

"....."

Could it be - Kyouko tried imagining Takiko's situation.

Maybe she was the same as her. She had learned that Natsume was actually a 'girl' and hence fought with her. Takiko seemed to have known Natsume from before, but it was most likely the 'male' Natsume. Because she wasn't a student, she didn't know about Natsume's identity being exposed at the Meguro branch. Then, she had learned about that fact while observing the Onmyou Academy studies yesterday..... and hence had clashed with Natsume. If that were true, then Kyouko could understand her ambiguous attitude.

"Kyouko. I'm really sorry for asking this after just meeting you yesterday..... You're very close with Natsume and the others, right? I heard that you were a bit out of sorts with them yesterday, but even so you've been friends longer than I have. So, please. Could you help mediate between me and Natsume?"

"......Me?"

Takiko replied "nn" to Kyouko's question, as meek as a child.

"I don't want to trouble you. I just want to borrow your strength and make an opportunity for us to talk. That's why I called so selfishly. ......Is that okay? Am I asking for too much?"

Takiko asked anxiously.

She didn't know what Takiko had heard from her father, but to Kyouko, who had just met her yesterday, this was indeed quite a brazen request. Judging from Takiko's words and tone, she herself seemed to be aware of this. In other words, she had to request this even if it she would shame herself for it.

To be honest, the origins of the girl Takiko were unclear, so she didn't have a good impression of her. Though Kyouko didn't believe she was a bad person, she felt that Takiko had a kind of a dangerous, troublemaking aura.

But it was a bit mean for her to rashly make such a conclusion. After all, she had experienced Takiko's current predicament herself yesterday. Thinking that way, she couldn't just freely refuse her. As for her origins, she must have already obtained some degree of trust from her father if he had already told her about Kyouko. She ought to help her with whatever she could do.

"......Then Takiko-san, are you free tonight?"

"Eh? Today? I don't have any plans."

"Oh. .....Actually, there's a fireworks festival tonight at the Sumida River. I, Natsume, and the others will be going together to watch."

"Eh!?"

Takiko responded in surprise.

"R, Really? But, Kyouko, weren't you still fighting with Natsume....."

"Don't worry, we already made up yesterday. .....Also, if possible, do you want to go with me? It might be a bit embarrassing to be invited to watch fireworks so suddenly by someone else, but the later it gets, the harder it is to decide. I can help you out a bit too, if it's today."

After hearing Kyouko's proposal, Takiko seemed to have inadvertently shut her mouth on the other end of the phone because of how sudden things were.

It was commonplace for people to hesitate because things developed too quickly. If she said no, then she probably wouldn't ask Kyouko to help her anymore. Kyouko had conveyed her sincerity, and everything else was a question of Takiko.

But,

".....I understand. No, that's a great proposal. Please let me join you."

Takiko accepted the proposal faster than Kyouko had anticipated.

"Though I'm still a bit nervous, it gets harder to get along as time goes on, just like you say. Thanks. I'll talk with Natsume again there."

Kyouko's impression of Takiko changed a bit again after hearing her thank her so sincerely and stiffly. She wasn't a bad person, but more like a clumsy yet serious-natured good kid. In that case, as long as she talked calmly, she would probably successfully make up with Natsume. Moreover, Takiko would be calmer than her, who had been affected by several overlapping issues.

After Kyouko returned an "Okay" to Takiko, she informed Takiko about her own plans for today. Just in case, she also gave Takiko her phone number. Takiko thanked her profusely while writing it down on the other end of the phone.

"I might get there a bit late, but I'll definitely meet up with you guys afterwards. Thank you Kyouko, you really helped me out. I'm extremely thankful."

Her voice revealed an exaggerated feeling of relief. Kyouko felt a bit strange.

So, inadvertently:

"So? Takiko-san, was it because of Natsume's 'family tradition' that you fought with her?"

She asked.

But,

"Eh? 'Family tradition'? What's that?"

Takiko asked back, extremely strangely. Uh oh. Kyouko regretted it. She shouldn't have asked that extraneous question just now.

But it was her duty to let Takiko make up with Natsume. It would also be embarrassing to ask that and dodge Takiko's question. The most important thing was that recklessly concealing it would leave trouble for the future. As things were, although it was 'family tradition', it was just a matter of time until Natsume's true identity reached Takiko's ears. Then, it would be a smaller shock if she told Takiko as early as possible.

"Sorry. I thought that was the reason you fought with Natsume-kun. .....Well, please listen calmly. Although I only learned this recently....."

Then, Kyouko seemed to be very talkative as she carefully picked her words while cautiously explaining Natsume's 'family tradition' and her true gender to Takiko.

After hearing Kyouko's explanation and understanding the meaning of her words--

Takiko was dumbfounded on the other side of the line.

Part 3

The blue sky dyed white with sunlight could be seen through the window.

The principal's office of the Onmyou Academy building. The sedate, antique interior was furnished like a Taisho-era cafe. But the room was currently permeated with tension, solemn silence, and dense aura.

The master of the room, the Onmyou Academy Principal Kurahashi Miyo, was sitting in a chair, focusing with narrowed eyes on a Liu Ren Board placed in the office.

The small body in the kimono was nervous, unlike usual, and she looked highly focused from every perspective. Ohtomo, who was also seated, seemed to be spacing out by the bookshelves on the wall without even daring to breathe loudly as he watched the principal's divination.

But.....

".....No good."

The principal sighed weakly.

The aura loosened and diffused into the surroundings. Her aged expression clearly showed fatigue. She had severely exhausted herself.

"I can't see it. I'm also getting old....."

"Principal....."

"Hoho. There's no helping it. 'Divination' is a heavenly gift. There's nothing you can do about it, no matter how hard you work. It looks like the duty I was made a 'diviner' for has already finished."

Her words revealed a bitterness that only she herself could understand. Ohtomo didn't say anything, staying on the other side of the office with a serious expression.

The calico cat curled up on the faraway sofa ran towards its master with a 'are you done already' attitude, climbing onto her knees. The principal plucked off her glasses, patting the shikigami's bright fur.

"......Then."

The principal checked with Ohtomo.

"Harutora-san's condition is quite bad, right?"

"Yeah. Extremely....."

Ohtomo's reply made the principal’s expression darken.

She had already heard that Harutora had performed extremely well in defeating Kagami Reiji's berserk shikigami during the Meguro incident. But this was the first time she had heard that his aura had been disrupted as a result.

Since Ashiya Doman's attack, the principal had been running around busily day and night for the Onmyou Academy's reopening. Also, after the Meguro branch incident - the Twin-Horned Syndicate sweep operation - she had received the bad news that her old friend Amami Daizen had vanished, and had done all she could to find the truth. Particularly the latter, which had to do with the life and death of her longtime ally Amami. Even if she was the principal, that matter still had the greatest priority.

But hence, it was true that she had moved her gaze away from the Onmyou Academy for a long time. The result of busying herself with the 'outside affairs' meant that she was 'uninformed' about the inside.

"......I'm truly unqualified to be the principal."

She muttered self-deprecatingly. The calico cat on her knees raised its head and mewed as if to cheer her up.

Come to think of it, she hadn't even talked much with her granddaughter Kyouko since the Meguro incident. She had even tried to use divination to learn about anything at all. But just like before, she had basically been unable to see a thing recently.

Her ability to interpret fate as a 'diviner' was currently declining.

But her responsibility as the Onmyou Academy principal hadn't changed.

"Anyway, I'm also worried about Harutora-san's condition. Maybe it's a side-effect from the magic battle like what you have?"

"I can't deny that, but I've seen several examples of those conditions. Harutora's condition seems more like spiritual encumbrance from a curse or an extreme depletion of aura. You could maybe call it a curse, but the fine points make it more like a 'seal'....."

"Seal?"

"Ah, no. Sorry. I was speaking nonsense. There are a lot of problems with his body as well..... Anyway, we have to have an Onmyou doctor examine him as soon as possible."

"But if it's related to a Tsuchimikado family secret art....."

"Yeah. Of course, it would be the most logical choice to have Harutora-kun's father examine it. But he's currently vanished without a trace and we can't contact him."

"Really....."

After Ohtomo said that, the principal's gaze also drifted through the air.

The principal's expression was solemn. The Tsuchimikado family was the master of the Kurahashi family. The principal had met Harutora's parents herself, and she probably knew them better than Ohtomo did.

"But, I think nothing should have happened to Yasuzumi-san. That man was an incredible diviner much better than I, and he also has Takahiro-san and Chizuru-san with him. Though they've been out of active duty for a long time, they're truly very skilled. They won't be easily harmed."

"That's true, but we can't contact them right now."

"Yeah. This is now my personal opinion rather than my opinion as a diviner, but they probably deliberately cut off communication to hide."

"....."

"What are they hiding from?"

"....."

The principal didn't answer that. Ohtomo didn't continue asking either, changing the topic slightly.

"What do you think of the fire itself? You don't have any detailed information on it either, right?"

"Yeah. It's very unfortunate. The Onmyou Agency seems to have started moving already, but I don't know much about their plans."

The principal sighed bitterly as she spoke.

".....There are movements in many different areas. From small to large. These movements might have a hidden pattern, but that's unclear from the outside. .....In addition, the people on the scene are probably very confused too."

"I feel the same." Ohtomo flatly expressed his agreement to the principal.

But, they definitely couldn't relax here.

"...Principal."

He questioned her thoroughly in an indifferent voice.

"Chief Amami's disappearance. And the burning of the Tsuchimikado main family home. Chief Kurahashi..... Your son hasn't responded much to those incidents, right? Or did he make his move long ago?"

It wasn't a reproachful tone, nor was it a complaining one. His composed voice sounded calmer.

But all extraneous emotion had been eliminated from the eyes underneath his glasses. It was a look that demanded answers, whether the other party was his boss or someone close to him. He remained calm while being a bit intimidating.

The principal stiffly closed her eyes when she heard her subordinate's question. Deep wrinkles were engraved between her eyebrows.

".....Of course he's responding to them. But that son is also the Exorcist Bureau Chief and the Mystical Investigator Chief as well as the Onmyou Agency Chief. There's no helping it that it's hard to keep hold of everything when incidents occur continuously like this."

"So you say that there are things he 'overlooked' because he's burdened with so many responsibilities? I'm sorry, but I never heard that your son was such an idiot. I've heard the opposite a few times though."

Ohtomo made this sarcastic remark and a heavy silence fell between the two of them.

The calico cat curled on the principal's knees batted unhappily at the silence pressing down with its tail. But the two of them still didn't make any reaction.

Not long afterwards, the principal slowly sighed as if to relieve herself of a burden.

"Up till now, I always lived as the Onmyou Academy principal and the Kurahashi family head, and I never did anything I could be proud of for that child as a 'relative'. I'm probably a bit guilty."

She slowly muttered.

She closed her eyes, tightening her expression. She straightened her spine, her elderly body tensing like a rope that had suddenly been pulled taut.

"But - that's too idiotic. It's been a while since I met my son. I'll go to the Onmyou Agency, meet him, and talk to him. .....Ohtomo-sensei?"

"Yeah."

"I'm extremely sorry, but could you write a letter of resignation? It's fine to leave the date blank."

Ohtomo's gaze instantly sharpened like a blade.

".....You mean to 'release my chains'?"

The voice he responded in had the same tone as the former Ohtomo - the Mystical Investigator him that had been named 'Shadow', whom the principal definitely didn't recognize.

Sharp, modest, and strong. Even commonly-used words would feel like a flitting blade.

The principal smiled.

"It's to protect my position - it's fine if you interpret it that way. Separating you from the Onmyou Academy may be the best way to protect me, the Onmyou Academy, and the students in the future. But no matter what, it's just one layer of insurance. I'm not saying that you can act freely. Please don't pull a reckless stunt."

Ohtomo returned to his original state when he heard the same advice as from his former coworker and smiled wryly. Though he was a calm and composed former Mystical Investigator, he always felt that the way he saw himself was a bit different from what the people around him knew him for.

"I'll keep that in mind."

It was a serious promise, not a lightly given reply.

"Then, the letter of resignation will come later, Principal. There's still a matter I'm concerned about. We mentioned her before, the matter of the visitor Souma Takiko."

"Ah, I'm also very concerned about that child. She showed an impressive power in the mock battle."

"Yeah. Also, she didn't lose to Natsume-kun, and her techniques are more refined. She will stand out even more in a real battle. But no matter what she herself says, the shikigami she brought along is definitely abnormal. It's undoubtedly a servant shikigami type, but I've never seen such a shikigami before. Also, the thing that puzzles me the most is how she called herself 'someone with ties of lineage to Tsuchimikado Yakou'....."

Ohtomo repeated the information he had heard from Touji.

To be honest, the fact that she had approached Natsume after mentioning Yakou was enough of a reason to be on their guard against her. Moreover, Takiko herself was full of mystery, and her true identity was intriguing.

"But what's extremely interesting about what I said just now is that she came to observe the Onmyou Academy's studies by the 'Onmyou Agency's introduction'. After some investigation, it seems that it wasn't just any ordinary guise, it was an instruction from the 'higher-ups'. Maybe it was an order made by the Chief. Don't you think it's a bit suspicious?"

The Onmyou Agency very rarely introduced observers here. Moreover, most of them were agency members or qualified specialized Onmyouji. Since Takiko had appeared after a formal introduction, there was naturally someone else involved.

The principal honestly acknowledged Ohtomo's doubts and speculation.

"The probability that child is related to my son is definitely high. If she's truly someone from the 'Souma family'."

"Eh? Do you have some clues?"

"The Souma clan and the Kurahashi clan..... More accurately, it's like that child said, they once had connections to Tsuchimikado family."

Ohtomo expressed interest as he heard the principal's unexpected reply.

The principal's gaze returned to the board on the desk again.

"......It was something from quite long ago. During the war. At the time, Tsuchimikado Yakou accepted the backing of the Imperial Army and was elevated to the top of the Onmyou Bureau that they revived. Did you know about that?"

"Most of it."

"Don't you think it's a bit strange?"

"Eh?"

"After all, at the time, the Tsuchimikado family - or more accurately, Onmyoudou itself was already abandoned, forgotten, and had retreated from the stage of history, right? In an era where we could construct huge battleships, tanks, and fighters, they unearthed the almost-vanished magic and even supplied funds, manpower, various political favors, and their full support. Is that what a modern country's army would do? Normally, wouldn't that be impossible?"

The principal's question confused Ohtomo. Now that she asked, that was indeed the case, but Ohtomo had never thought about the problem from that perspective.

"Well, it's indeed as you say, but that's history after all..... The army higher-ups probably saw Yakou's magic ability, I guess? Or maybe he had support from the nation's religious elements or the faction swayed by Hitler's ideology?"

".....The military faction that supported Yakou was the Souma clan."

"!"

Ohtomo's expression changed drastically for the first time and his body twitched. The principal continued speaking seriously.

"They weren't purely religious, they had unique skills passed down since ancient times. They were a group of true practitioners. That was why they gave such a high appraisal to Yakou's excellent skills. They supported Yakou from within the military. Yakou's Onmyou Bureau was also established by the Souma clan."

".....I see."

Ohtomo listened extremely seriously to the principal's explanation. At some point, a fearless, provocative smile had shown up on his face.

"'Ties of lineage', huh..... Then I can understand. Souma Takiko came in contact with Natsume and Harutora before, and at the time she talked about Yakou's private school. With that background, she would indeed be able to know about those details. That shikigami is more like a shikigami serving that Souma family than that kid's own shikigami. Moreover, the fact that she has contact with the Chief is also....."

".....Yeah."

The principal admitted with a bitter expression.

"At the time, it wasn't only the Souma family that supported Yakou. We, the Kurahashi family, were first among the ranks of Tsuchimikado Yakou's - the Tsuchimikado family's support. After the war ended in defeat, the Kurahashi family remained, but the Souma had almost completely vanished. But....."

"......They were still tied together?"

"Maybe they kept contact in other ways. In any case, this is all hypothetical for now. But if my son and Souma are connected in some way, then we have to make plans quickly. There's only one reason that these two would be together."

"......'Tsuchimikado Yakou'."

Ohtomo spoke heavily. The principal silently nodded.

"Indeed, we need to prepare ahead of time."

The eyes beneath Ohtomo's glasses flashed like the bared fangs of a wild beast.

Things would be much easier if it were just Souma Takiko. But the support of the Souma clan was behind her, so they definitely couldn't be careless. Moreover, just judging by the shikigami that Takiko carried around, there was undoubtedly a group of practitioners behind her - strong, skilled practitioners.

Or,

"......Maybe the roots of the Twin-Horned Syndicate are unexpectedly related to them."

Ohtomo's speculation made the principal widen her eyes as if she had been struck.

She pressed her lips together, not refuting him. She felt that Ohtomo's speculation wasn't impossible.

If Souma was related to the Twin-Horned Syndicate, then they were very likely to be involved in Amami's disappearance. Along with the fire at the Tsuchimikado family residence. In that case, various mysteries would be answered in an instant. After this would be the time for the former Mystical Investigator to shine.

".....Well, it's very fortunate that we've identified our opponents, but if I go act over there, the defenses around Natsume-kun will be reduced. Principal, can I leave it to you?"

"True. It's better to just place Natsume-san next to me altogether. If Natsume-san's by me, then they probably won't dare to mess around. Also, we have to find where their parents are as soon as possible."

"I'll leave it to you. I'll resolve that as soon as possible. For now, say that I'm still 'recuperating' to explain my job as a teacher. Well, actually, uh, you could also talk about workers' compensation or overtime....."

The principal smiled brightly as she watched Ohtomo playing the fool.

"We'll treat it as 'paid leave'."

"Ah, that's still a bit unsatisfactory..... Whatever. Tell Natsume to be extremely aware of her surroundings too."

"Of course. He should understand this very well."

The principal guaranteed that seriously, but Ohtomo suddenly raised an eyebrow when he heard those words.

Revealing a somewhat mischievous expression:

"Oho, 'he', is it? Principal. Could it be that you still don't know?"

"Huh? About what?"

"Haha. Tenma-kun really was right, there really is an information gap between students and teachers. If the principal didn't know either, then I must be the only teacher who knows about this. How annoying. Everyone needs to build better relationships with the students."

Ohtomo laughed exaggeratedly, speaking pretentiously. The principal's face tightened in surprise, and even the cat on her knees scratched its ears as if it were trying to say 'what's wrong with this guy'.

"Ohtomo-sensei? What are you trying to say?"

"No, I only learned of it yesterday too."

Ohtomo finally put away his comical expression, explaining Natsume's matter to the principal.

He didn't know how serious his expression was. After all, once he said the truth, it wasn't something he could take back. Though disguising one's gender shouldn't lead to punishment, Natsume's Onmyou Academy life would have to change in the future.

But--

The principal's reaction after hearing this greatly exceeded Ohtomo's expectations.

"......What did you say!?"

After she gasped, she said nothing more. Her face paled. This was Ohtomo's first time seeing the principal with such a stunned expression, and he couldn't help but unconsciously correct his expression.

After being astonished for ten seconds by this shock:

"Is..... that true? Natsume-san is a girl? But how is such a thing possible....."

Her eyes widened and her body shivered. This wasn't a trivial matter. Ohtomo also immediately did away with his playful attitude from before.

"No, it's not wrong. She herself admitted it. But..... principal? Is it that shocking?"

Ohtomo's eyes sharpened and he stared at the principal in a ready stance. But the principal, dumbstruck and motionless, didn't look at Ohtomo.

Understanding and uncertainty emerged on her intelligent face.

"Yasuzumi-san, did you....."

Behind the principal's back was set frosted glass decorated to match the principal's office interior. The summer sunlight that tinted the sky was slowly becoming a soft dusk.

The board in the office moved slightly.

Part 4

".....Are you certain?"

He heard Kurahashi ask to confirm what he heard, a rare look of surprise showing on his always-calm face.

The Onmyou Agency executive room. Yashamaru shrugged his shoulders in front of Kurahashi.

"Is it true?"

He asked Takiko, who was next to him. Takiko silently affirmed, her face aghast. Kumomaru was also behind Takiko.

"I thought it would be better to tell you. After all, that's enough to completely overturn the information we had."

Yashamaru said this with his arms crossed, like a solemn young scholar who had obtained poor results. Kurahashi didn't pay Yashamaru any heed, looking at Takiko next to him instead. Takiko gave a slightly angry nod to his statement.

"It's not wrong. That information came from no other than your daughter. Natsume just usually wears a male disguise..... but she's actually a girl."

".....What does that mean. A girl posing as a boy?"

"I heard that it was the Tsuchimikado main family's 'tradition'. 'The successor of the Tsuchimikado family must appear as a male to outsiders.' So only Harutora of the branch family and a few people close to them knew of Natsume's true identity before the Meguro branch incident led to her gender being exposed."

"....."

Kurahashi silently placed his elbows on the desk, burying his face in his hands.

A frightful gaze shot from his eyes. Though he didn't say a word, the entire room seemed to be filled with a feeling of pressure. Yashamaru and Kumomaru were indifferent, but though Takiko didn't show any fear, she was still angry.

"Hmm. So you really didn't know either? Though the Kurahashis are a branch family, they treated you like 'outsiders' too, huh? Or....."

Yashamaru uncrossed his arms, putting his hands on his waist and sighing softly.

Then, a cold smile emerged on his lips.

".....This 'family tradition' was a fabrication from the very beginning. In order to conceal something....."

Yashamaru, who mentioned two possibilities, seemed to have already come to his own conclusion. The ironic smile that had emerged on his clever face was like that of an old chess player staring at a younger player's coup.

The wordless Kurahashi seemed to agree with Yashamaru's opinion. Takiko, who watched the two of them talk, quietly gulped with a tense face as well.

"But, supposing Tsuchimikado Natsume's male disguise was to conceal something, we should be focusing on the goal of the cover-up."

Takiko couldn't help but watch Yashamaru. Yashamaru felt his master's doubt and smiled to alleviate the tense atmosphere.

"For example, Princess. The thing that comes to mind first right now is that rumor, right? 'Tsuchimikado Natsume is the reincarnation of Tsuchimikado Yakou.' Incidentally, the roots of that rumor lie in another rumor, 'Tsuchimikado Yakou will reincarnate as the child of the Tsuchimikado family containing his blood.'"

"That rumor's authenticity is uncertain, right?"

"Oh, Princess. We're not so ignorant as to completely believe all the rumors and let this kind of trick - or perhaps I should call it a countermeasure - lead us by the nose."

Yashamaru spread his arms like an actor, lifting a white-gloved index finger.

"First, the latter, the rumor that 'Tsuchimikado Yakou will reincarnate as the child of the Tsuchimikado family containing his blood.' That was the final conclusion reached by many Onmyouji researching Yakou's magic, including me. People doubted it because it sounded pretentious, but we deliberately manipulated the information to mislead them. After all, if that rumor was publicly known, it would become difficult for us to move. Of course, as long as we haven't completely unraveled the magic Yakou used to reincarnate, we can't say anything 'for sure'. But please remember that that fact is trustworthy and very likely to be accurate."

Then, Yashamaru lifted his middle finger to follow his index finger.

"The previous rumor. There's still no explicit information to prove the one that 'Tsuchimikado Natsume is the reincarnation of Tsuchimikado Yakou.' There's just a 'basis'. Right, Kurahashi?"

Yashamaru's monocle flashed as he looked over.

Kurahashi, who sat next to the desk, endured the shikigami's gaze with a stony expression.

He opened his mouth solemnly:

"When the current head of the Tsuchimikado family, Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi, belonged to the Onmyou Agency, he used divination on himself. The conclusion was that the child inheriting his blood would be Yakou's reincarnation. That was his first prophecy, or in other words, the first moment he possessed the ability of 'divination'. I - happened to be present."

"....."

Takiko's eyes widened silently and she pressed her lips together. Yashamaru coughed lightly.

"Returning to the topic..... 'Tsuchimikado Yakou will reincarnate as the son of the Tsuchimikado family containing his blood' is essentially certain, as I said just now. Also, 'Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi's child will be that reincarnation' is based on Yasuzumi's prediction, and there's a possibility that he 'lied' or 'read incorrectly'. But, Chief Kurahashi who saw that moment can attest to the prophecy. Then overall, 'Tsuchimikado Natsume is the reincarnation of Tsuchimikado Yakou' was a worthy enough hypothesis for us to act. Do you understand that?"

Takiko nodded obediently upon hearing Yashamaru's respectful lecture.

".....I understand. But how did we get here from when I talked about Natsume being a girl in disguise just now?"

"Nn. There's indeed no relationship if you consider it directly."

"Eh?"

"But how about this, Princess? Yasuzumi might have predicted that 'his child would be Yakou's reincarnation', right? Then, that has nothing to do with Tsuchimikado Natsume being male or female. Then there would be no meaning in deliberately disguising herself as a male. Hence, if you consider it directly, her male disguise wasn't trying to conceal anything, it was just purely because of a 'family tradition' that the Kurahashi family wasn't informed of. .....But--"

Hmm. Yashamaru deliberately made a pondering noise, turning his neck and looking at Kurahashi out of the corner of his eye.

With an indifferent tone:

"But, Kurahashi. Why are you so shocked? If Tsuchimikado Natsume is a female, does that even make anything inconvenient--"

"Yes."

Kurahashi replied immediately without a shred of affectation, forming a clear contrast with his former coworker.

"The reason is that Yasuzumi's child was a boy."

Takiko went stiff. On the other hand, Yashamaru seemed to have anticipated this long ago and wasn't surprised.

He bluntly asked:

"Why?"

"I 'saw' directly with my own eyes. I..... My mother and I. When Wakasugi Yuuko was pregnant, the child in her belly carried yang aura."

Yashamaru calmly narrowed his eyes.

All people carried aura, whether they were practitioners or not. Males had yang aura and females had yin aura. Though Natsume used magic to disguise her aura type, she had to use her dragon's aura. In other words, it wasn't very easy to cover up. More importantly, it was essentially impossible to forge the aura of a fetus.

".....Of course, when you 'saw', Yasuzumi-kun was....."

"Aware."

Yashamaru raised his head to look at the ceiling upon hearing Kurahashi's reply.

He muttered "I see" with a poker face. Then, he clapped.

"Then here's what happened. Oh my, to think a gathering of veteran Onmyouji would be misled by such simple second-class magic. Yasuzumi-kun performed brilliantly."

Yashamaru's emotions couldn't be seen from his whimsical attitude. Then, Kumomaru, who had been silent up till then, interjected "Chief Dairenji" as if to reproach him.

"Though it's simple, it was no easy move to pull. Someone's life..... The life of a child was the price of that magic."

"Really? But it's pretty effective to be able to buy more than ten years of time, right?"

Yashamaru tilted his head, a bit confused at his former subordinate's reasoning.

Then--

Takiko's eyes widened after hearing that statement and then shook.

"Why!"

A strong voice.

A powerful, aura-filled voice that seemed to reverberate through the room. Kurahashi's attention as well as those of Yashamaru and Kumomaru turned to Takiko.

"Why did Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi do such a thing....."

Yashamaru quickly traded glances with Kurahashi. "Princess." After Yashamaru respectfully called out to her, Kurahashi continued the topic.

"Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi does not share the same ambition as ours. .....No, there's no need to put it so tactfully. More accurately, he has no ambitions. He's a..... man who's already half dead. Of course, he doesn't wish for Tsuchimikado Yakou to awaken."

".....That's why he set up an imposter? By sacrificing Natsume?"

Takiko moaned, her head lowered. Her red hair seemed to seethe. Her whole body gave off an insuppressible aura.

Kumomaru stared at his master, dumbfounded. Kurahashi's expression became increasingly serious as well. Yashamaru smiled deeply after a moment of surprise.

"Is that the intention of the 'Tsuchimikado'?"

Takiko quietly glared at Kurahashi. Kurahashi endured Takiko's gaze head-on.

".....Yes."

"....."

Takiko's eyes burned. Her gaze revealed an intense aura, and Kurahashi inadvertently narrowed his eyes and gritted his teeth.

Takiko suddenly spun around, leaving the executive office with her red hair fluttering. She kept staring ahead, without any thoughts of turning around. Her resplendent aura even felt divine, as if she were a completely different person from the Takiko before.

Takiko's figure vanished on the other side of the door. "Chief!" Kumomaru's expression changed and he pleaded with Yashamaru.

An absentminded gaze flashed through Yashamaru's eyes, one beneath a monocle. A devilish smile emerged on his thin lips. He looked like an aristocrat, yet also like Mephistopheles upon becoming entranced by Faust's pure soul.

".....Good, very good. Kumomaru. I'll leave the princess to you."

"As you command."

Kumomaru rapidly chased after Takiko, leaving the room. In that period of time, Yashamaru stroked his chin, leaning forward slightly and snickering nonstop.

As he grinned, he turned a monocle-wearing eye towards Kurahashi.

"Kurahashi. What do you think of our princess?"

As if he were flaunting a collectible treasure.

Kurahashi stared at the door Takiko had left through with a grave expression, not replying at all.

◎

"Princess!"

Kumomaru caught up to Takiko very quickly. But it would have been very difficult to call out to her back if he hadn't been chasing her bitterly.

"Please keep calm. Where are you going?"

The workers they passed cast curious glances at the two of them. Kumomaru shrank back a bit but still spoke to her with all his power. But Takiko didn't respond, nor did she intend on stopping.

Takiko walked towards the receiving room they used. After entering the room, she finally turned to look at Kumomaru who was shouting 'Princess'.

"Kumomaru."

"Yes."

"Unfortunately, I should have realized that they were already ensnared by Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi's magic. They haven't had their own free will since they were young....."

Takiko's abrupt words made Kumomaru's eyes widen. But Takiko didn't pay any heed to her shikigami's reaction, walking into the room.

"Then, I probably can't resolve anything with words. I can only use force. .....This is for their good too....."

Takiko's words seemed nefarious, and Kumomaru didn't know how to react. Yashamaru's 'leave the Princess to you' referred to her safety, but was it really alright to let Takiko act however she wanted?

"Princess. By 'them', you mean.....?"

"Kumomaru, you should have seen it already."

His master replied flatly to the shikigami's question. Kumomaru was taken aback when he heard that answer.

"I originally thought it was an unrelated accident, but that wasn't the case. In yesterday's mock battle. He responded to my 'furunokoto'."

"......Princess."

Kumomaru finally understood Takiko's intentions and froze in place. Never mind Yashamaru for now, but Kumomaru's feelings were similar to Takiko's. He also anticipated Tsuchimikado Yakou's awakening, Yakou regaining his original will, and to fight together as his companion.

Takiko walked to the table placed in the corner of the room.

The tall, wrapped wooden box was placed on the same table as yesterday. Takiko reached out to the wooden box without hesitating, taking off the wrapping.

"I'll break Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi's curse."

The wooden box was sealed with paper, and Takiko ripped through it.

"I'll awaken Harutora."

Chapter 5 - The Tsuchimikado Girl

Part 1

Huge changes had happened in Natsume's life since Harutora had entered the academy. They had clashed when he entered, but they had become friendly after they made up and gained many good friends. Worried about Harutora's poor results, she would sometimes be a bit strangely angry and sometimes she would smile brightly at him. It was thanks to spending three years of time together with Harutora disguised as Hokuto that she was able to sincerely express her emotions like this. Harutora described the present in a half-complaining, half-prideful tone as a 'life with no motivation' or 'boring days'. Though it was indeed a bit demotivating and it was indeed a bit boring, it definitely wasn't meaningless.

The happy and busy days continued. Every day, she got angry, was surprised, and smiled from the bottom of her heart.

Before she noticed, this had already become Natsume's new 'daily life'.

Harutora had expanded Natsume's world.

Harutora and the others had already prepared themselves for the huge crowds of the fireworks festival, but the actual situation greatly exceeded their expectations.

".....Shibuya on a weekend can't even compare. Is everyone from Tokyo gathered here?"

After all, the train line here had already been packed. There were many yukata-wearing watchers as well. Clamor and heat gathered and slowly formed a huge mix.

Harutora and the others had set their meeting place to be Asakusa's Sensoji Temple. But Harutora was speechless when he walked out of the train station and saw that it was packed so full of people that there was no place to walk.

There was still some time until sunset. The heat of the summer evening made it stuffy and hard to breathe. All around them was activity and smiles, filled with a 'festival' atmosphere.

"Wh-Where's Sensoji Temple?"

"Over there. We're almost at the Thunder Gate."

Of the three of them, only Touji had come to Asakusa before. He had said he would guide them - though they could only move with the flow of people - so Harutora and Natsume followed Touji, slowly advancing. When they looked back, they could see the Tokyo Skytree on the other side of the road. So tall. That was a natural feeling, but it was still very big. It was big enough that they couldn't make sense of how far away it was.

"Incredible..... After the fireworks end, let's walk over there and look."

It had already been a year since he came to Tokyo, but Harutora had never seen the Tokyo scenery. Everything he saw felt new, and he inadvertently gawked here and there. Just then, the famous Furaijinmon - the Thunder Gate - entered his vision. There were still people hustling and bustling around them, but there were also groups trying to get memorial photos.

"Hey, Touji, let's take a picture."

"More of this? Come to think of it, I wonder if you're really alright."

Touji, annoyed, looked back at Harutora over his shoulder.

"You know that your power went out of control a few hours ago, right? Don't only think about having fun."

"What. I told you it completely stabilized. We took the time to come here, so it would be a waste to not properly enjoy it."

"I guess I'll have to be responsible for treating your idiocy. Natsume, come persuade him too."

"....."

"Natsume?"

"Eh? Ah, s-sorry. I didn't hear."

".....You guys....."

Touji's mouth twitched, unlike his usual attitude.

There was no helping it that Touji was worried. After all, right now wasn't the time for Harutora and the others to leisurely watch a fireworks festival.

After Harutora's aura went out of control and he lost consciousness, Natsume and Kon had brought him back to the dorm. Fortunately, he had regained consciousness within ten minutes, but the problem was the trigger for his loss of control and how it had stopped.

".....It could be that one-armed oni. If Natsume weren't the one saying it, it would have sounded like a joke....."

Natsume had explained the part of the incident she had seen to Harutora and Touji who had hurried over after learning about the situation. Considering the situation, it had undoubtedly been the one-armed oni Natsume saw that stopped Harutora from

going out of control. Kon, who had witnessed it herself, had also provided the same testimony.

But they were clueless as to why an oni would stop Harutora from going out of control. It was very strange that an oni just happened to be present in the first place. Thinking that, they should believe that the oni had originally been hiding nearby - around the Onmyou Academy dorms. Then, he had appeared after learning about Harutora going out of control.

"A one-armed oni appearing near Natsume..... There's only one answer if we think about it that way."

".....We still can't be certain. I'm not completely confident either. It could even be the same as that Mystical Investigator from before....."

Natsume refuted Touji's opinion, but judging by the gist of her words, she already basically believed it. She was already different from the Natsume who had been kidnapped by the Mystical Investigator Yakou fanatic long ago. The current her had witnessed Ashiya Doman and Shaver's 'true self' at a close distance, not to mention the Phase Three mobile spiritual disasters. More importantly, the oni this time had released demonic aura from his body when Harutora had gone out of control. Natsume wouldn't have 'seen' wrongly.

"I originally thought that the Twin-Horned Syndicate had finally been vanquished and that the Yakou fanatics were cleaned away, but Natsume's old home was burned down, a girl with connections to Yakou appeared, and now Kakugyouki's come out. I wonder what's going on."

Harutora and Natsume glanced at each other wordlessly upon hearing Touji's complaint.

Kakugyouki.

That was the name of one of the servant shikigami guardians of Tsuchimikado Yakou. Of the countless shikigami that served Yakou, he and Hishamaru were famous as Yakou's left and right-hand shikigami. His true form wasn't well known in detail, but according to rumor, he was a 'one-armed oni'.

Kakugyouki had vanished just like Hishamaru after Yakou's death. Their current whereabouts were still concealed in mystery, but if this was Kakugyouki, then they couldn't ignore his actions no matter what.

Moreover,

"What's more, that oni even said the words 'Raven's Wing' and 'Saotome Suzu'."

Saotome Suzu was a Yakou researcher who had once belonged to the Imperial Household Agency Lingering Spirit Division. She had proposed that the Raven's Wing could determine Yakou's reincarnation, and her current whereabouts were unclear. They had learned recently that she was Ohtomo's acquaintance, but they still didn't know any more detailed information. In other words, they had been told to 'ask her for help', but they had no way of getting in contact.

"Supposing that oni was the true Kakugyouki, then the fact that he said 'Raven's Wing' and the name Saotome means that he quite believes the saying that the Raven's Wing can be used to determine Yakou's reincarnation. Thinking carefully, the Raven's Wing was in Natsume's father's hands until not long ago....."

Originally, the Raven's Wing had been kept in the Onmyou Agency, but that was a fake. Principal Kurahashi had secretly hidden the genuine article in the Onmyou Academy and had given it to Yasuzumi before Ashiya Doman attacked, leaving it with him.

".....Then, Souma Takiko's information becomes a little more believable."

Takiko had said that the residence fire had been an aggressive action of the Onmyou Agency.

"Looking at it this way, the Onmyou Agency wanted to take back the Raven's Wing, Natsume's father refused, and it led to that fire....."

Originally, several strong magical defensive walls were set in the Tsuchimikado family residence, and it was too unreasonable to imagine that a pure fire had burned everything down. Of course, it was also hard to imagine that the residence had been burned because Yasuzumi had refused to return the Raven's Wing. But Takiko had said that Yasuzumi set fire to the residence. In that case, there probably wouldn't be anything left there. If not for the message Harutora's father had sent informing him of their safety, then they probably would have considered the worst situation.

"Also. Harutora noticed that there were Onmyouji monitoring the dorms - no, they were probably monitoring 'you guys'. Though it might not be related to Kakugyouki, that person's identity is also unclear. Supposing the Tsuchimikado fire was related to the Onmyou Agency, then that person is very likely an Onmyouji belonging to the Onmyou Agency..... Then, why would the Onmyou Agency do such a thing? What exactly is going on? Even I'm not sure."

Harutora couldn't speak either upon seeing Touji frown and groan. If even Touji was raising his hands in forfeit, Harutora obviously wouldn't be able to understand.

"Anyway, the only thing we can confirm is that there's a 'dangerous' atmosphere around. But we had everyone gather together to go see a fireworks festival without collecting information or preparing for unexpected situations. It's ridiculous, no matter what you say."

Touji seemed to be in a bad mood as he led the two of them. He had been like this since before they left the dorms.

But in some sense, one reason Touji was this unhappy was because a true oni had appeared close by and he was the only one who hadn't realized, even as he had been snooping for information in his own room. Another reason was purely that he had missed the opportunity to see an oni, and he felt angry at his poor senses. Touji was a living spirit who housed an oni within his body, and he had long since gotten used to demonic aura, so there was no helping it that he had reacted slowly.

The three of them moved slowly as they talked about this, passing through the Thunder Gate and entering the commercial road in front of the Sensoji temple.

The two roads that headed straight into Sensoji were lined with bustling souvenir shops. In addition, there were also confectionary stores, ningyouyaki stores, bread stores, and even stores specialized in selling kimonos and stores specialized in selling maneki-neko. But to Harutora and the others' eyes, it was just people, people, and more people. The flood of people extended into the distance before them under the flickering illumination of lanterns.

Harutora smiled wryly, stunned by the sea of people.

"Sorry, Touji."

He apologized from behind.

"I don't know how it became like this either. To be honest, I'm a bit frightened."

Touji, who walked ahead, looked at him out of the corner of his eye upon hearing his murmured words. Harutora noticed his good friend's gaze and gave a fearless smile.

"But, isn't there anything we can do? Even if there's a clear 'enemy' around, that doesn't mean there's a clear 'reason' for him. Then even if we can't be careless, I hope that we can live like always."

Something was undoubtedly happening right now. Moreover, it seemed that several large-scale incidents were happening at the same time. The fire at the residence, Takiko's confession, and Kakugyouki along with the unknown spies.

To be honest, it was very frightening. The fact that things were unclear was even more terrifying. It was as if things that he had to be concerned about had snuck into every corner of his daily life. The fact that he had become overly cheerful might be a reaction to that.

It was because now was the time that he couldn't give up his daily life. If events from the outside encroached on his daily life, then the most important thing was to hold onto the important aspects more tightly.

For example, Kyouko.

He didn't know what would happen in the future. Then, right now he should be strengthening his bonds with the people around him. That thinking might be a bit strange, but he hoped to be able to confirm the 'depths of their friendship'. So that he would be able to deal with whatever happened. So that they would be able to stay together, no matter what happened.

He wasn't seeking to obtain Kyouko's strength. What was more important was that he wanted to get along closely with her. He hoped that they could rebuild their friendship.

"......So for now, we'll enjoy the fireworks. The six of us, together."

Touji knitted his brow at Harutora's words.

But not long afterwards, he helplessly relaxed.

"Bakatora."

He scolded.

Though it wasn't impossible to understand, there were other reasons that Touji had finally agreed to the fireworks festival proposal before they left the dorm in the first place. If the dorm was being monitored, then it would be safer to mix in with a group of people.

Natsume and Kyouko had already reconciled, and afterwards they could probably clean things up if they had Harutora get on his knees and beg for mercy. If he was able to reconcile with Kyouko, they would immediately be able to ask things of the principal. Touji had even considered keeping Harutora and Natsume from returning to the dorm and going straight to Kyouko's home to discuss things. One or two extra people shouldn't be a problem for the residence of the famous Kurahashi family.

"Well, alright. I don't really want to keep chattering anyway. But we can't split up, since if we wander off..... Natsume? Are you listening?"

Touji stopped, looking back to look at Natsume who followed behind Harutora. "Ah, sorry." Natsume hastily looked up.

"What's wrong, you've been like that since before. Are you worried?"

"O-Of course I'm not worried. I don't know if something will happen to Harutora. But..... I'm very concerned about what that oni said....."

"What? What did he say other than the Raven's Wing and Saotome Suzu's business?"

"W-Well..... Um..... Though I don't really understand....."

Natsume stopped speaking, her face solemn. It seemed that the reason she had been soft-spoken was because she had been immersed in her thoughts.

She looked at Harutora's face.

".....Um, Harutora? Your body's really okay, right? You're not forcing yourself?"

She looked up to confirm.

She expressed the worry in her heart, but with astringent words and expression. Also, she couldn't conceal her anxiety. Harutora was a bit embarrassed and felt a pang in his chest. The fact that he was the reason for Natsume's anxiety filled his heart with guilt.

"Sorry."

Harutora unconsciously apologized.

"Sorry for making you worry. But I'm fine for now. I'll be careful. Natsume, I'm counting on you if there's a problem."

Of course, she was carrying Ohtomo's charms. If he cut back on rapid actions like yesterday's and stayed calm and careful as he acted, there probably wouldn't be any problems.

Natsume, who had stopped, was pushed from behind and staggered.

Harutora hastily caught Natsume in his chest as she fell. Her slender body leaned on him and Harutora's heart inadvertently raced.

"S-Sorry!"

"No--"

Natsume apologized, returning to her original voice. The flow of people still hadn't stopped. Touji was annoyed and said "Don't stop, keep walking", urging the two of them on.

"....."

A momentary confusion.

Then, Harutora grabbed Natsume's hand and followed behind Touji.

"Eh, H-Harutora-kun?"

"......It would be troublesome if we got separated now."

Harutora averted his gaze but still pulled her hand as he walked forward. Natsume also kept up with his strides as she followed behind. There wasn't much room to move around in the first place, and the distance between the two of them instantly shrank to the point where their shoulders were touching. But the two of them didn't even think of releasing their hands.

The flow of people slowly moved forward. Harutora and Natsume continued walking forward step by step with small strides.

"...Hey."

Harutora spoke, still walking forward.

"...Yeah."

Natsume replied, still walking forward.

"There definitely won't be any problem."

Harutora spoke with a normal tone, half to cheer himself up. He hoped that he would be able to dispel some of Natsume's anxiety. He formed words with all his power in order to cheer up his important childhood friend.

"A lot of things have happened up through now. .....We made it through successfully."

"......Yeah."

"The two of us aren't alone."

"......Yeah."

"There will always be a way."

"Yeah. .....Right. That's right."

Natsume tightly gripped Harutora's hand. Harutora also firmly clasped Natsume's hand in return.

".....Thank you, Harutora-kun."

Harutora's face reddened. But it was truly great that he had been able to say it.

He glanced at Natsume out of the corner of his eye. He met the gaze of Natsume, who had looked over at the same time, and they both turned away in surprise like an elastic collision. But unlike that reaction, their linked hands gripped each other firmly.

"....."

"....."

"....."

"....."

Noisy laughter passed through the surroundings. The nighttime heat penetrated their skin. A festival chant sounded from somewhere. The air was mixed with the scent of sweat and burning soy sauce.

Natsume's black hair, tied with a pink ribbon, fluttered soundlessly in the air. Intertwined fingers. Heavy steps. His ears could hear his loud, agitated heartbeat. His brain was hot, but wasn't at all unhappy.

"Hey, we're here, we're here. We found it pretty easily."

Touji, who had walked ahead, waved his hand vigorously at them from the front. Harutora and Natsume's hands separated as if they had touched hot iron.

Sensoji's courtyard was still packed with people. The five-story pagoda and the main hall towered towards the night sky. Stalls were lined up like a maze. Touji waved near the Treasure House Gate, where there were even more mingling people.

He saw familiar faces dressed in plainclothes next to a thick pillar that was painted red. Tenma was dressed in clothes for warm weather, and Suzuka wore a nostalgic goth loli outfit. There was also another person, dressed in a beautiful yukata--

"...Kyouko."

Harutora muttered unconsciously.

Kyouko also noticed Harutora and Natsume behind Touji and showed a tense and partially embarrassed expression.

Guided by the flow of people, Harutora and the others slowly moved in the direction of Kyouko's group. The Kyouko reflected in Harutora's eyes became larger and larger.

"You're so slow! Where did you guys go!"

The first time Suzuka opened her mouth was for an angry roar. Her hands were full with heavy bags of cotton candy, takoyaki, and other things in quantities that one person couldn't possibly finish. This scene felt familiar. She had definitely come quite early, to have been able to buy so many various things in this sea of people.

Tenma smiled wryly.

"There are so many people that it's hard to get here on time. She scolded me harshly even though I was just a little bit late, and....."

He looked at Kyouko next to him.

"Kurahashi-san just got here too."

As he said this, he casually escaped to the back.

Then, Harutora's group of three merged with Kyouko's group of three.

Suzuka closed her mouth after getting angry. She kept secretly glancing at Kyouko, seeming to be a bit concerned. Tenma looked very sincerely at his friends, and Touji didn't say anything unnecessary. Natsume and Kyouko looked at each other and then nodded quietly, making room for Harutora.

"......Ah."

Harutora dropped his jaw and sputtered.

Kyouko figure in the yukata was more beautiful than he would have anticipated. Her delicate atmosphere didn’t contrast against her gorgeous maturity, but rather merged to become greater than the whole. The young men around them often glanced over, and she herself seemed to be a bit embarrassed.

Harutora walked in front of Kyouko, his mind blank as the other four watched them. What should he say and how should he say it? His mind was in chaos. He had no idea where his determination and motivation during the day had gone.

"Uh, Kyouko....."

He spoke with a weak, timid voice. Moreover, there was no follow-up. Awkwardness and tension were still restricting Harutora's actions.

But,

...Okay? Don't forget, alright? Since this is a promise.

"......Sorry. Kyouko. I was wrong."

He cleared his throat and apologized. Kyouko's expression went slightly stiff.

"I really hate myself for this too. I don't know how to apologize..... Even if I apologize now, it definitely can't change anything....."

Even if he apologized, he couldn't make amends. They couldn’t go back in time.

But he wouldn't be able to go anywhere if he didn't apologize. He could only constantly look back, regret, and sincerely apologize. Harutora could only think of those insufficient methods to express his apology.

Then.....

Kyouko stared motionlessly at Harutora and finally sighed after staring solemnly for a while.

She approached Harutora, and,

Slap.

Slapped Harutora with her palm.

Natsume, Tenma, and Suzuka were taken aback, and even the people around them looked over in surprise. A number of them whistled dirtily, but backed off instantly after noticing Touji's stern look. But the one who had showed the most self-restraint there was probably Kon, who decided not to materialize. Though that time should have been time for her to perform her duty as a defensive shikigami, she held herself back from intervening for her master.

"K-Kyouko....."

Harutora felt his cheek, his eyes wide. On the other hand, Kyouko inexplicably became relieved, looking at Harutora whom she had slapped forcefully.

She smiled softly, and said:

".....Bakatora."

He had no room to retort at all.

Though Kyouko smiled, Harutora quickly saw she was behaving incredibly nervously. Guilt flooded his heart again.

"......Sorry."

There should be many more suitable words, but all he said were unpresentable words of apology. "Sorry." Harutora deeply bowed his head to Kyouko.

The observers watched the two of them with very curious gazes. Touji continued glaring; this time, even Suzuka, Tenma, and Natsume secretly blocked the gazes around them or glared over with intimidating attitudes.

Harutora and Kyouko weren't in the mood to pay attention to that as their minds were focused on each other.

"Really..... You were much cooler when we were little....."

Kyouko shrugged her shoulders as she spoke, forcefully pretending to be calm.

"It's so disappointing."

"......Sorry."

Harutora could only awkwardly apologize for his hopeless stupidity.

Kyouko slowly took a breath, and then revealed a firm yet also slightly hurt smile.

"Bakatora."

Compared to her words from before, her voice had already gotten much more cheerful. It was a voice that expressed that she could smile without regret even if not everything had been completely resolved.

"......Then, let's go."

She walked out, ending their topic just now on that note. She was unable to clearly forgive him, those were Kyouko's true feelings. Her feelings were complex and couldn't be defined in terms of forgiving or not forgiving. But Kyouko began walking forward, holding those thoughts in her heart.

"Kurahashi-san." Natsume took a step forward. Kyouko smiled.

"...Are you going to make good on that promise?"

"Y-Yes."

"Okay."

She looked at Natsume again as she said this.

"But, you don't have to wear your uniform when you come to see fireworks. And it's even the male one."

"S-Sorry. This is the only proper clothing I have right now....."

Touji, Tenma, and Suzuka all more or less showed surprised, astonished expressions when they heard the conversation between the two. Though they knew that the two of them had already reconciled, they hadn't seen it first-hand. Moreover, it was their first time seeing Natsume speak with Kyouko using a 'feminine manner of speech'.

Kyouko's eyes widened in surprise when she heard Natsume's reply.

"Really? Uh, well, that's fine. But don't act like the normal Natsume-kun when it's just us today, be the other 'Natsume-chan', okay? I want to properly understand 'Natsume-chan'."

"I, I understand. If Kurahashi-san says so--"

"Honestly, just call me Kyouko. Even Bakatora calls me that."

Kyouko smiled wryly, teasing her. "You don't like it?" The nervous Natsume frantically shook her head.

"Kyouko..... san."

"Yeah."

Kyouko nodded in satisfaction.

"Kyouko....." Harutora seemed to be dazzled by the two of them. Touji and Tenma looked at each other while smiling, and Suzuka harrumphed - very happily.

"Ah, come to think of it, Tenma, you still call me 'Kurahashi-san', right? That's too formal, why don't you take this opportunity to call me by my name directly too."

"That makes sense. It's true that I've been a bit too formal until now. Got it. Then let's call each other by our first names..... That's not bad, right, Suzuka-chan?"

"Why are you turning to me! Don't look down on me, Glasses!"

"Hey, hey, we finally managed to chat smoothly, so don't get too concerned about the details, Suzuka-chan."

"You always called me by my name directly in the first place, headband! And you guys, don't think I'm going to play along at easing up the atmosphere! How rude! I'm a Divine General!"

As the red-faced 'Child Prodigy' Suzuka roared angrily in opposition, smiles broke out on the others' faces. In that moment, Kyouko returned to being a 'companion' of Harutora's group.

"Well, the fireworks are about to start."

Kyouko looked at all of them and finally looked at Harutora.

"Let's go."

Part 2

The rumor that Natsume was Yakou's reincarnation had become more and more frequently heard when she came to Tokyo and entered the Onmyou Academy. Natsume's life had been immersed in Onmyoudou since her childhood, but she hadn't come in contact with the 'Magic Community' since she had always been secluded in the countryside. She originally had some level of understanding of her role in the world, but what she saw after actually coming into that role exceeded her expectations.

The absurdities of the Yakou fanatics and the plans of adults.

But now, Harutora stood beside Natsume. In addition, it wasn't just Harutora. There was also Touji, Kyouko, Tenma, and their former enemy Suzuka.

Of course, friends weren't always good. Sometimes someone would annoy another, and sometimes someone would hurt another.

But sometimes someone would help another, and sometimes someone would protect another. Each time, both sides would grow. Natsume had learned from Harutora and her other companions that she didn't have to only rely on herself.

Of course, it was still hard to do away with her anxiety. Because she was rumored to be Yakou's reincarnation, often associating with them may at some point impact their future.

The future was always shrouded in darkness, impossible to see clearly.

But there was one thing she could be certain of.

The days she spent with Harutora and the others were a clear-cut 'present' that illuminated her life in the darkness.

The Sumida River Fireworks Festival. It seemed that there would be two fireworks-shooting areas set up along the river. They didn't have to walk to the riverside to be able to see it, but the towering buildings would block their vision, and there were very limited perfect observation points. Of course, good observation points had many people around, so there were also quite a few people who had taken seats and prepared to watch the fireworks while eating. Due to traffic control, vehicles couldn't come through, so many people occupied positions directly on the road.

"In the end, everywhere is full of people. Should we just walk around while watching?"

The experienced Tenma proposed this and no one opposed him. Fortunately, Suzuka had bought enough food. She charged them preposterous prices for it because of the matter of her name from before, but Harutora and the others obediently lowered their heads and paid, maybe because their stomachs had long since been empty while they walked on the road. Incidentally, what Harutora bought was a pound cake that Suzuka had eaten half of. It was so large that it was understandable that Suzuka didn't want to eat the whole thing, and though it was a bit cold, it was still extremely delicious.

"Ah, I haven't eaten any of what Natsume has. Let me have a bite."

"Eh? Ah, okay, go ahead."

"Hey, Suzuka-chan, you're eating too messily."

"Touji! That's a can of beer--"

"You're wrong. It's a carbonated malt beverage."

"If you wanted to get away with it, you should have at least said it was non-alcoholic beer."

Harutora and the others walked along noisily. Right as they reached a crossroads:

In the distance--

Bang!

A noise resounded and the surrounding visitors started cheering.

Harutora and the others quickly looked up. Then, the first firework bloomed on the other side of the crossroads into the night sky still colored in twilight. Then the second. The third. Fourth. The air shook as if from a festival taiko drum, and beautiful colors shone in the night sky. The blue-tinted sky was painted in gorgeous rainbow colors. The six of them stopped moving and silently immersed themselves in the same scenery.

Enormous fireworks blossomed in the sky and scattered in the air.

The constant, uninterrupted reverberations and brilliance repeatedly made dazzling performances. Upon seeing such a magnificent scene, everyone's hearts were slowly filled with simple wonder and joy. They temporarily forgot about the emotions that burdened them like resentment, pain, and grief.

"......It's so pretty."

Natsume quietly mumbled. Everyone present probably held the same thoughts.

Suzuka's body shivered, her eyes sparkling.

"Hey, hey! Let's get closer!"

"You don't need to be in such a hurry. There are still a lot of fireworks, it's going to continue for a whole hour."

"Tenma's right. Suzuka-chan, don't mix into a group of people, you'll disappear because you're short--"

"Don't force on the 'chan'! And I don't need you worrying about me!"

"Okay, okay, Suzuka. For now, let's all walk together while watching."

"Yeah. If it's really no good, we just need to fly a simple shikigami into the air to watch....."

"No, Natsume-chan. That's too boring. It's prettier when you watch with your own eyes."

The group chatted with each other, and the voices of even the members other than Suzuka became more and more excited. In that time, fireworks continuously exploded in the distant sky, shooting faint light into the surroundings. As the curtain of night finally fell, the gorgeous fireworks led the visitors into an excited mood.

Harutora and the others all broke out into smiles and started walking again. Their gazes were directed at the sky, and their strides were slow and natural.

Kyouko glanced at her phone.

".....So slow. Is she really coming?"

She quietly muttered to herself. Harutora noticed and asked "What is it?", but Kyouko just smiled and shook her head without explanation.

Harutora and the others passed through one gap between buildings after another following Tenma's lead, searching for a suitable observation point. Though it was hard to focus on watching the fireworks with this method, it wouldn't feel crowded. Suzuka seemed to be in a hurry, but this wasn't bad.

Then,

"Oh, that overpass seems pretty good, doesn't it?"

At their second crossroads, Touji looked up and mentioned indifferently. As they looked over, the lovers who had just been watching from the overpass had just decided to change places and had walked down. It happened to be empty right now.

Suzuka's expression changed and she pointed a finger.

"Bakatora, sprint!"

"Me again, huh."

Harutora helplessly charged up to the overpass, occupying a position in the corner.

"Ah, we can see very clearly."

He only realized when he reached the corner of the overpass that they could see the location of the shooting from a gap between buildings. Though they were a bit far, this was enough. In addition, this place had a light breeze and it was cooler than walking. Suzuka chased after Harutora, grasping the railing and leaning forward. She stared at the brightly-blooming fireworks while letting out childish cheers.

The other four also walked into the overpass.

"Ah, nice. We can see very clearly from here. Let's watch from here for a while before moving on."

Everyone followed Tenma and lined up along the overpass rails, leaning in the same direction.

Their smiles were dyed white by the light of the fireworks as they all watched. They wordlessly stared at the colorfully-blooming fireworks, and then pointed fingers in pleasant surprise like characters in an anime as a particularly bright firework

exploded and dyed the night sky gold. They all held their breath in anticipation until the glittering sparkles of light vanished completely.

Then, the continuous fireworks roused their laughter again. Every famous fireworks festival was stunning.

"Also, the wind's pretty nice."

Touji sighed. They noticed that Touji had taken off his bandanna at some point, letting the air brush his forehead.

"It's really cool here, what a catch."

"Yeah. Walking here was really sweaty. Kurahashi - no, Kyouko-chan must also be very hot since you're wearing a yukata."

"Hehe. Though yukatas look cool, they're actually not. T-shirts are more comfortable. But Natsume-chan, you're probably the hottest, right?"

"I, I'm already used to these clothes."

"Is that so? It's a rare opportunity then, let's go shopping for clothes together next time."

"Really That would be great."

"Hey! You guys! Hurry up and watch the fireworks! The fireworks! You can look at Kyouko in a yukata however much you want later!"

"Oh, Suzuka-chan. Don't speak so coldly."

"Haha. This place really has a good view though. It seems like we'll be able to enjoy it till the end--"

"Ah, I'm out of coke. Bakatora, go buy some."

"Why is it always me! Also, weren't you watching the fireworks!?"

"Shut up, I even gave you the pound cake."

Suzuka took out her wallet from her bag, thrusting a hundred-yen coin into Harutora's hand. Even though Harutora wrinkled his face and complained "That's not enough", she pretended not to hear.

"Harutora."

Even Touji also tossed him a coin.

"Get me a bottle of carbonated malt beverage. The carbonated beverage the starts with a 'chu' and ends with a 'hai'."

"Eh? Eh. .....Anyone else? I'm going anyway, so I might as well help everyone buy something, right?"

Harutora made himself available for orders in resignation, and Tenma smiled and chose an oolong tea. Kyouko said "Then, I want lemonade"...

She nudged Natsume with her elbow.

She whispered to Natsume, who turned around:

".....You have to fulfill your promise."

She smiled and winked. Natsume immediately understood what she meant and blushed.

"Natsume? What do you want?"

"Eh? Ah, I, I'll go with you. You won't be able to carry it yourself."

"Ah, there won't be a problem. I'll just put them in a bag--"

"N-No! I haven't decided yet, so I'll go! I-I'll go with you!"

Natsume pulled on Harutora's arm and forced him to walk at a brisk pace. Harutora staggered and followed Natsume away from the guardrail. Do your best. Tenma, the only one who heard Kyouko's quiet encouragement, tilted his head.

Harutora walked down the stairs to the overpass as Natsume dragged him.

"Hey, hey, Natsume! That's dangerous!"

"Ah! S-Sorry!"

Natsume let go in a panic after seeing Harutora almost fall down. Harutora walked next to Natsume with a wry smile.

For the time being, the two of them strolled around looking for a convenience store. Though they couldn't see the fireworks behind the buildings, the sound still came to them from afar. The warm air swayed, mixing with the cheers of the visitors. Such a high temperature should have been very unpleasant, but his mood was inexplicably relaxed.

"Natsume, aren't those clothes hot, like Kyouko said?"

"I, I'm fine. Because I'm drinking water properly."

"And your hair's so long. Summer must be uncomfortable for you."

"It is compared to Harutora's..... But you really don't need to worry. I don't hate the summer."

They chatted to each other about meaningless topics, passing through the sightseers. They had thought there were already enough people when they had entered Asakusa, but they hadn't thought that even more would squeeze in after the fireworks started. Things would be tough when they went back. Harutora inadvertently sighed.

He glanced at Natsume next to him.

"......It's great."

"Eh?"

"The fireworks. It was great that we came here."

"......Yeah. It was."

Natsume smiled at Harutora. Harutora realized even more that it had been the correct decision to come see the fireworks when he saw her smile.

"Kyouko's so cool."

"Is that how you should praise a girl?"

"But you understand too, right?"

"Yeah, I admire her a lot."

"Touji, Tenma, and Suzuka. Everyone's good people."

"Yeah, I think so too."

"It's great that I was able to come to Tokyo. I'm glad I could live with everyone like this."

"......Yeah."

Natsume fidgeted upon hearing Harutora's somewhat exaggerated feelings.

"I think it was great that you could come to Tokyo too. My hard work paid off."

She said a bit proudly.

"Huh? What hard work?"

"Eh? Ah, um! ......Um, the ema..... and other things....."

Natsume lowered her head in panic, mumbling. She was almost completely silent at the end and he couldn't hear what exactly she had said. Harutora looked at Natsume a bit strangely, but she stammered with her head still lowered.

"What's wrong?"

"N.....Nothing....."

She replied with a blush. Harutora knitted his brow, but soon relaxed and continued looking for a convenience store. Natsume repeatedly glanced at Harutora out of the corner of her eye, starting to check on him.

"....."

The expression she watched Harutora with seemed like she had something she wanted to say. But Harutora didn't notice her gaze.

Natsume hesitated for quite a long time.

"H-Harutora-kun."

"Hmm?"

"Um..... well.....!"

"What? What is it?"

"W-Were the fireworks fun?"

"Ah, yeah. We really have to come see this when in the summer!"

"I-It's already been a year."

"Yeah. Well, although we didn't have the time to watch last year's fireworks....."

Just then, Harutora suddenly thought of something.

Suzuka's joyful appearance emerged in his mind. Come to think of it, Suzuka's eyes had been sparkling in Harutora's countryside fireworks festival too. Suzuka's life had been completely immersed in magic before, and it seemed that she had no experience with fireworks or summer festivals.

Natsume was probably the same, with just a difference in degree. Thinking back, his parents had once led him and Natsume to a festival together. But that was already a childhood memory from quite a long time ago.

"Come to think of it, Natsume. The last time we watched fireworks was a long time ago, right?"

"Th-That's not true. Last year....."

Natsume suddenly went silent when she reached that point.

"Last year? Huh? Did you see fireworks in Tokyo last year?"

Natsume had been in the Onmyou Academy alone until Harutora and Touji had come to Tokyo, and she probably hadn't had any friends to go see fireworks with. Could she have gone alone? Harutora looked at Natsume, waiting for her reply. But Natsume stayed silent.

...Huh?

Something was a bit strange. Just as Harutora noticed something, their surroundings changed.

Harutora and Natsume had arrived in the neighborhood parking lot. There were several shop stands here.

"Oh, perfect. We'll buy the drinks here."

"Y-Yeah....."

These weren't dedicated commercial stores. Several long folding tables were set up underneath a tent that one would commonly see at an athletic competition, probably set up by the town council or some kind of local organization. They were selling fried noodles and corn, and cold drinks inside an industrial ice box filled with ice. Also, there was a household inflatable water pool and a small balloon-fishing game inside.

"Eh. It feels homemade, but this isn't bad."

To put it nastily, this kind of shop was set up to trick children and rarely had patrons. But it was fortunate that there were few customers. Harutora came to the tent to ask about prices and Natsume followed behind him.

Harutora suddenly stopped in front of a certain tent.

There was a shelf set up inside with several objects lined up on it in intervals. There was a long table in front of it with a group of toy guns.

A shooting game.

"Hey Natsume, look, this is--"

Harutora thought of last summer and excitedly turned towards Natsume.

He met Natsume's gaze.

His childhood friend seemed to be a bit disoriented, staring at Harutora with her lips pressed together. Her eyes showed a similar understanding. As he was about to speak, it unconsciously flashed through Harutora's mind that she had an expression that showed she already knew what Harutora was going to say.

Seeing the same scene--

Remembering the same memories--

That kind of expression...

Harutora, his head turned, didn't continue speaking. His body was firmly convinced before his mind, and his heartbeat accelerated.

Natsume, last year.

Fireworks festival.

Shooting game.

Harutora's gaze turned from Natsume's eyes to the pink ribbon tied in her hair.

His first time trying a shooting game. The cork bullet that hadn't been able to hit at all. Finally getting a bubble-blowing set. The pink ribbon decorating the box, which matched her Yukata. Her tying it in her hair--

Hokuto's pink ribbon.

"......Natsume, you....."

"....."

Time twisted for the two of them.

Natsume, dressed in a black uniform, overlapped with Hokuto in her black yukata in front of Harutora's eyes. The pink ribbon in Hokuto's hair connected with the pink ribbon also tied in Natsume's hair.

In Harutora's mind, the eyes in which had emerged embarrassment and tension melded together with the eyes of Hokuto as she wept and shouted that night. Harutora's perception of time instantly staggered.

Bang. A firework bloomed in the night sky.

Beautiful light illuminated Natsume's body.

Harutora stood still wordlessly.

Natsume stared at Harutora with moist eyes.

In this moment, Natsume seemed like someone that he would think of as 'how beautiful' at first glance.....

"......Found you."

Their world shattered.

Harutora momentarily felt like he was drowning as he was pulled back into reality. He came to his senses at the same time as Natsume and then turned towards the direction of the voice at the same time.

"......Takiko-san."

Souma Takiko stood at the entrance to the parking lot.

An awe-inspiring, resolute expression appeared on the girl underneath the illumination of the fireworks. Her determined, piercing look made them unable to help but think of a young priest about to face her god.

Takiko wore the same clothes as yesterday, a white Onmyou Academy uniform. She seemed to be carrying something, which was very strange and didn't suit the atmosphere here. At first glance, they couldn't recognize what it was. After a few seconds, as the shock created from Takiko's sudden appearance subsided, they finally realized it.

It was a birdcage.

Takiko was carrying an old birdcage made of brass. The interior was empty, with nothing at all.....

No.

There was something. A big bird that didn't match the birdcage's size. A raven was shut inside, he just hadn't seen because it blended in with the darkness.

A raven.

Goosebumps rose on Harutora's skin.

"......Tsuchimikado Harutora."

Takiko called out to him directly. Her attitude was clearly different from yesterday.

"Please believe that what I'm doing is for your sake. It's the best choice, for both you and us."

"What are you saying?"

Harutora started becoming alert and took a stance. Though that was an expected reaction, Takiko had a hurt expression she couldn't hide, as if her only friend had shot her a hateful glance.

She hung her head sadly, but didn't give up, looking at Natsume instead. Natsume also confronted Takiko with a stiff expression.

"Natsume."

Takiko spoke politely.

"I'm sympathetic to you. But if I make Harutora awaken, you'll definitely also become our 'companion'. Though you'll be lost and confused at the start, in the end you'll definitely--"

"Takiko!"

Harutora shouted, interrupting her words. Takiko started shaking.

"That's enough. I clearly told you that you weren't worthy of trust."

"....."

Takiko's face paled. Harutora knew that what he said had hurt the girl, and painful feelings also spilled forth in his heart. But he had to say it, he couldn't just let it go.

".....You understand the reason we can't trust you too, right? To be honest, we know that you have various problems and that you're a bit strange, but you shouldn't be a bad person. Though I'm not too sure why, I truly think that I like you. Normally, we would have become good friends a long time ago. But....."

Harutora's eyes were full of energy.

"But that's impossible. If you keep doing as you did before, we can only reject you. Be honest and tell us everything. Everything, from the beginning to the end without concealing anything. We'll listen seriously until you finish. If you say you can't do it..... then there's no helping it. Please don't appear in front of us like this."

".....Harutora....."

Tears welled up in Takiko's widened eyes. Her listless appearance as she stood there was frightening and defenseless. A pang ran through Harutora's chest again, but he didn't change his attitude, staring motionlessly at Takiko.

The sightseers nearby noticed the strange conversation between Harutora and the others and deliberately stopped.

".....Takiko."

Natsume returned to her male voice.

"It's like Harutora says. We might be able to help you. I hope that..... you'll be able to tell us the truth."

Her tone was full of sincerity. He thought of what Natsume had said yesterday, that Takiko resembled her former self. These were probably Natsume's honest feelings. Even Natsume wanted to approach Takiko as much as possible.

But--

Upon hearing Natsume's sincerity-filled words, Takiko showed a resigned smile instead. She made her decision.

"Thank you."

Takiko announced.

"I'm very happy, Natsume. But telling the truth won't do. I can't do something like facing you honestly without concealing anything. Even if I could do it, it would be no good for you either. After all, you're..... a girl, right? You've already been cursed to disguise yourself like this."

Stunned, Harutora and Natsume went speechless. Takiko smiled coldly upon seeing them.

"Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi--"

She let out a hateful voice, still wearing a smile.

"...I'll let you watch me break your curse."

Harutora and Natsume instinctively took stances. At the same time, Kon materialized in front of them. The sudden appearance of the girl frightened the surrounding visitors, but Kon gripped her blade without paying them any heed.

A battle was about to break out. But Takiko was almost indifferent to their reactions. Her body's aura swelled and she inhaled powerfully.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten--"

She stared at Harutora, slowly chanting an incantation. The incantation he had never heard before resounded with a buzz--

"...Furube, yura yura to, furube."

Takiko's hair danced and rose from her head like snakes of flame. At the same time, the ornaments scattered in her hair resonated with her aura and started shaking at a high speed.

There were ten in total.

"Lingering Spirit Calling!"

Natsume shouted dumbly. But the voices around them slowly distanced themselves from Harutora, and that shout became the final sound he heard.

His vision narrowed and his perception thinned. His heart accelerated - he seemed to feel that, but the feeling also began becoming murky. These were the same symptoms as during the mock battle. But their force was on a different level. He couldn't resist, as if his consciousness was being forcibly stripped from his body. He didn't know if he was standing or if he had already collapsed. All of his senses left him, and the only thing left around him was the buzzing, resounding incantation and the aura surrounding him.

Natsume--

Would that word he wanted to give voice to be able to become sound?

In the next moment, Harutora's aura burst forth.

Part 3

She had trembled when she faced the Nue and despaired when she faced Doman. But the first time she clearly realized she was going to die was in the battle against Shaver.

An overwhelming opponent.

True killing intent.

But even if she and Harutora had died in battle together, she wouldn't have had any regrets. if there was a world after death, wouldn't being reborn there be unexpectedly relaxing?

If even she could make friends and enjoy life in ways that she didn't even dare to imagine.....

It might be more relaxing compared to timidly feeling out and walking through the darkness or compared to squandering her life facing a future that she didn't look forward to.

It was better to die without knowing anything than to face a fated, rending despair.

She inadvertently thought of such things. If she could welcome the final moment together with Harutora, she would be satisfied and consider it an unexpected fortune.

But.

Harutora definitely wouldn't agree. Harutora definitely wouldn't think death was a good thing, nor would he be satisfied.

Then, she hoped that Harutora could live on. She hoped he could live on forever and ever. Then, if Harutora still lived, she would also want to live. With him and next to him.

She hoped that they could share their experiences and conquer the difficulties before them together.

But--

Harutora's aura burst forth.

"Harutora-kun!"

Strength had already flooded from Harutora's body like a raging torrent before Natsume screamed. The strength bursting in all directions wasn't magical energy carrying Harutora's consciousness, but rather pure spiritual power. Moreover, the amount and density reached a level where it would endanger Harutora's surroundings.

...This was bad!

Kon, who endured her master's aura, started swaying and soon fainted after shouting "Ah", collapsing powerlessly. Natsume also unconsciously put up a simple barrier to protect herself, but Harutora's spiritual energy almost shattered the barrier. The customers of the stores and the shop workers noticed the abnormality without even having to look and screamed loudly as they fled in all directions.

Several fireworks shot out above her head again. Natsume cried out in the surrounding commotion.

"Harutora-kun!"

But Harutora still didn't respond no matter how loudly Natsume shouted. His eyes were empty and he didn't move. His consciousness clearly hadn't returned to normal.

His strength was going out of control, and that wasn't it.

"What did you do to him!?"

She roared at Takiko. But Takiko was focused on her magic. Her red hair danced in the air as her hair ornaments swayed while vibrating rapidly.

Ten hair accessories.

They swayed lightly to and fro.

"As I thought!"

...Lingering Spirit Calling Magic!

Natsume knew the incantation Takiko had chanted just now. She had used a magic called 'Sacred Words', an incantation used in concert with ten artifacts known as 'Ten Sacred Treasures'. But the 'Ten Sacred Treasures' were artifacts deeply hidden in mystery, and there were no records of them in ancient records or in texts like the Nihon Shoki. It was only viewed as a divine mystery because of passing allusion in the Sendai Kuji Hongi and the law-related text 'Ryo no Gige'.

These ten treasures were the Okitsu Kagami, Hetsu Kagami, Yatsuka no Tsurugi, Iku Tama, Makaru Tama, Taru Tama, Chikaeshi no Tama, Hebi no Hire, Hachi no Hire, and the Shimamono no Hire. One could exercise divine might by chanting an incantation in concert with these treasures. But when this magic was used in the ancient 'Chinkonsai', ten 'jades' were prepared to parallel the 'Ten Sacred Treasures', and the swaying 'yura yura' technique was used. Takiko had used her hair decorations as 'jades' to reenact the ancient magic. Those decorations themselves were special magical tools.

But,

...Why!

Lingering Spirit Calling was a magic belonging to Imperial Onmyoudou and was currently designated as banned magic. The reason was that Lingering Spirit Calling was 'soul-related magic', just like its name. The magic was cloaked in mystery, and it was so strong that it could even 'revive the dead'.

"What do you want!? What are you doing to Harutora-kun!?"

She questioned Takiko again, but the red-haired girl still didn't budge. Though the aura coming off of her body was nothing compared to Harutora's, it was still respectable for a first-class practitioner.

"......Natsume-dono....."

A feeble voice made her come to her senses. It was Kon. She crouched beside Harutora, unable to even stand. The strength coming from her master had increased by a lot, but that couldn't be seen at all. As expected, this was different from his aura purely going out of control.

Afterwards, Kon didn't even make a sound, but her intent had already been completely conveyed to Natsume. Even if Harutora's condition wasn't a simple loss of control, he was undoubtedly releasing an intense aura. If this continued, it was very likely that his aura would be exhausted. She had to stop it soon.

Natsume focused her determination and she reached for her charm. The charm Ohtomo had made.

But,

"...Don't move."

A sudden motion came. The aura made Natsume inadvertently back off. A young man she had seen before appeared in front of her. It was Takiko's shikigami, who had appeared at the end of the mock battle yesterday. She seemed to recall that he was called Kumomaru.

"Back off!"

She swung her hand and roared. But Kumomaru stubbornly stayed between them, making no motion to let her pass. Natsume's blood boiled.

"Order!"

Natsume swiftly turned to charms when she realized that she couldn't resolve this relying on words and released one. A fire-element charm. The opponent was a shikigami. She had used a charm from point-blank range without holding back. But--

It was ineffective.

Kumomaru didn't even take a defensive stance. He just stood there indifferently, his entire body was immersed in scorching flames. Not even a little bit of lag was produced on the shikigami, shocking Natsume into speechlessness. Then was the next charm magic. She released an earth-element charm, a metal-element charm, and a wood-element charm one after another using Five Elements Mutual Generation. She changed to a magic focusing on speed, raising the magic's power in the blink of an eye and shooting out a high-density stream of water.

But,

"It's no use."

Kumomaru easily blocked the jet of water produced after Mutual Generation with the palm of his right hand. The exploding torrent of water shot into the surroundings,

splashing into a storm-like whirlpool of magical energy, but the shikigami didn't budge. Natsume instantly doubted her own eyes, feeling as if she were caught in an illusion.

Kumomaru flung off the drops of water on his right hand, slowly proclaiming to Natsume from the center of the magical energy whirlpool.

"I don't want to hurt you. Please be cooperative for now."

The eyes Kumomaru looked at Natsume with were full of anguish and compassion, as if he had known Natsume for a long time.

Natsume gritted her teeth.

This shikigami, his master Takiko, and the Yakou fanatics were all like this. They always put on an expression as if they understood Natsume the best and pretended to know everything while blindly pushing their expectations of Natsume onto her. What did they know about her? She wanted to question him loudly and couldn't hold back.

"...Come, Hokuto!"

Right now wasn't the time to hold back. A strong aura appeared, answering Natsume's summons. A golden ribbon of light even more brilliant than the flowers of light dancing in the night sky extended and grew.

A dragon giving off a divine aura appeared, leisurely looking down below it.

What the dragon saw was aura running out of control, Harutora standing still like a soulless shell and a shikigami with an appalling spiritual pressure, Kumomaru. And Takiko, who looked like she was being possessed by a divine spirit.

The Hokuto whom she had always been able to keep cool-headed had become more dignified along with its master's growth. The dragon instantly picked up Natsume's intentions, twisting its body in midair and charging at Kumomaru like lightning.

Kumomaru perfectly avoided the pouncing dragon, and Hokuto also stopped itself before crashing into the ground, pursuing Kumomaru as if crawling along the ground. Kumomaru dodged and Hokuto chased. The dragon's giant body cleanly smashed the surrounding tents out of the way.

Kumomaru's movements momentarily slowed. His body swayed, dragging his right leg as he slipped through the air. Unexpectedly, Kon had pulled off this surprise move. She had originally been in a condition where it was hard for her to move, but she had still approached Kumomaru by surprise while he was avoiding Hokuto and slashed at his right leg from behind his back with her wakizashi.

Kumomaru turned a somersault and leaped into the air, and Hokuto rapidly soared into the air to fight with him. It was as if it had cooperated with Kon for this perfect opportunity. Kumomaru, who couldn't move at will in the air, shouldn't be able to dodge.

But,

"...Namu Great Bodhisattva Hachiman."

Kumomaru chanted an incantation in midair and brought his hands together. Aura instantly exploded from his clapped hands.

The burst of aura hit the approaching Hokuto head-on, and though the somewhat-cowed Hokuto bared its fangs and continued to chase, the momentum of its attack had been weakened and Kumomaru twisted his body to dodge. Moreover, using Hokuto's horn as a foothold, he slowly kicked off down to the ground.

Natsume held her breath in shock.

...Just now, that was!

It wasn't magic. No, in theory it would be classified as belonging to first-class magic, but it was different from magic that used methods. It was close to Harutora's going out of control in a sense. It was a primitive magic that had appeared before 'techniques'.

In any case, Natsume's charm magic from before was a drop in the bucket against this kind of might. She became conscious again of how frighteningly strong this shikigami was.

"...Give up."

"!"

Even while facing Hokuto, Kumomaru still wasn't flustered. His attitude felt more 'troublesome' than Shaver's excited, blade-swinging attitude. It was unfathomable.

But in that moment, Kumomaru also panicked. He hastily leaped off the ground, practically flying back to his master - to Takiko.

Then.

A group of white paper shikigami poured towards Takiko like an avalanche.

"Suzuka-san!"

The shikigami slid between the approaching group of shikigami and his master by a hair's breadth, swinging his arms as if scattering mist. A fearsome spiritual pressure burst out and Suzuka's group of shikigami were swept away like true paper. But just then, the 'next person' charged up, giving off demonic aura, his armor flashing with an exorbitant will to fight.

It was Touji.

"Take this!"

With a splitting roar and the force of a cannon, the living spirit-empowered Touji smashed his fist into Kumomaru. But Kumomaru blocked Touji's strike, with the strength of his whole body, directly with just one hand. The arm he gripped Touji's fist with just shook slightly.

Touji shouted happily from under his iron helmet. Then, he started fighting. He continuously punched, kicked, and swiped at the enemy, giving him no breathing room. Kumomaru caught, avoided, and counterattacked as much as he could. He kept his master behind him and didn't retreat half a step. In addition, he even slowly advanced, pushing Touji back as he unleashed a storm of attacks.

Touji remained immersed in his attack and continued to fight strongly; however, Kumomaru was unfazed. Never mind overcoming his impregnable defenses, he didn't even budge. But Touji still didn't let up. He had other things to try.

"......Natsume!"

There was no need for him to remind her, as Natsume had already realized Touji's intent. While Touji was entangled with Kumomaru, she charged towards Harutora with all her might. She gripped Ohtomo's charm in her hand again.

Just as Kumomaru noticed their intent,

"Order!"

Natsume threw the charm at Harutora.

Ohtomo's charm split into tiny pieces. The pieces surrounded Harutora and swirled into an eddy after splitting.

The charm Ohtomo had prepared instantly dispersed Harutora' crazed aura, just like during the mock battle. The swirl slowly shrank and the pieces finally entwined around Harutora's body. Then, Harutora's body shuddered sharply.

"Harutora-sama!"

The moment before he collapsed to the ground, Kon, who had recovered her movement, supported him from below.

Harutora's aura stopped overflowing. Ohtomo's magic seemed to have also 'scattered' the Lingering Spirit Calling magic that Takiko had cast. The moment Kon grabbed him, Harutora suddenly regained consciousness.

"......Eh? Just now, I....."

Harutora let out a weak groan. "Harutora-kun!" A relieved expression returned to Natsume's face and she ran to his side.

After confirming the success of the operation, Touji also stopped his attack and pulled away from Kumomaru. Just then, three more people ran panting to the parking lot that had become a battlefield.

In the lead was Suzuka, who had sent her shikigami, and following behind were Kyouko and Tenma.

"What are you doing!? That's not at the level of a joke anymore!"

Suzuka roared.

Then, Kyouko also shouted:

"Takiko-san! What's going on!? Please explain!"

She questioned with wide eyes, clearly angry. Tenma tried his best to understand the surrounding situation. Touji retreated beside Suzuka and the others, focusing his whole mind on Kumomaru.

Harutora, Natsume, and Kon. Touji, Suzuka, Kyouko, and Tenma. Takiko slowly faced the students who had held out a friendly hand to her just yesterday. Her ornaments had already stopped shaking, and calm had returned to her red hair. The somewhat unsuitable rumbles of fireworks exploding in the distance reached the location of Takiko and the others.

Takiko's expression was extremely serious under the illumination of the fireworks' light.

She silently stared at Touji, Suzuka, and the others, then her gaze moved to Harutora's group. Kumomaru calmly stood in front of Takiko, naturally staying able to move at a moment's notice.

"......I'm the one continuing the Souma blood....."

Takiko suddenly proclaimed.

"Once, our Souma clan joined hands with the Onmyouji Tsuchimikado Yakou out of a common desire. The outcome was that our hope was shattered, but we still didn't give up. As the descendant of the Souma family, I will achieve my clan's mission."

Then, Takiko extended her arms, raising the birdcage she had held in her hands – and the raven shut inside - towards Harutora.

"Tsuchimikado Harutora. You are Yakou's reincarnation."

She asserted matter-of-factly.

First Harutora, then Natsume, Touji, Suzuka, Kyouko, and Tenma momentarily failed to understand the meaning in Takiko's words, showing empty expressions.

Harutora, leaning on Kon's shoulder, said:

"......Wh-What did you say?"

He asked back, perplexed. The others stared at the dialogue between the two with bated breath.

Takiko said:

"Harutora. You were originally the main family's child..... the child of Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi. Natsume, you were the 'decoy' that person prepared. Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi gave up his duty as a Tsuchimikado and cast a 'curse' on the reincarnation of his great ancestor to confuse others. His intentions no longer need to be discussed. You two are very pitiful for being imprisoned by that man's curse since your birth. I will release that curse. As the descendant of Tsuchimikado Yakou's former allies."

...What.....

Natsume didn't understand what she was saying at all. Though she felt like Takiko had gone crazy..... While her expression seemed like she was forced into a corner, she was very clear-headed.

Harutora was the main family child?

She was a decoy?

...What did that mean?

What was Takiko saying?

"......Hey, Takiko."

Touji asked with a fearless tone - but one revealing wariness.

"Do you know what you're saying? Do you have any proof?"

"......The truth will show itself."

Takiko replied to Touji's challenge with one sentence.

Then,

"Go, 'Raven's Wing'. Return to your master's side."

She released her extended hand that held the birdcage.

The birdcage dropped, its movement seeming extremely slow. The birdcage made a sound upon hitting the ground - it opened.

The raven inside flew into the night sky from the opened exit, spreading its more than a meter-wide wings. It flapped its black wings powerfully. It looked like a raven formed from the essence of the dark night --

It opened its eyes.

The area that they had originally taken to be black eyes were actually closed eyelids. The true eyes that revealed themselves below the eyelids were dazzlingly golden. Natsume followed its flapping movements, finally noticing when it was above her head. That raven had three legs, and each time it beat its wings, golden light scattered from its black body.

The legendary yatagarasu.

The symbol of the sun in Onmyoudou.

"......A yatagarasu?"

The also-airborne Hokuto - 'that' Hokuto - tensed its body in fear upon facing the inexplicable aura it gave off. The yatagarasu dancing in the night sky gracefully flapped its wings with no concern for the dragon, its body melding with the black night as it scattered stardust-like particles of light into the surroundings.

It resembled a divine bird.

Natsume and the others silently looked above their heads as if petrified, like they had been bewitched. The raven elegantly swung around--

It descended rapidly in a glide.

Towards Harutora's head.

"Haru--"

It wasn't fast, nor was it sharp. It didn't feel as fierce as an attack from Hokuto at all.

But they couldn't stop it. The yatagarasu dropped down to Harutora as if it were flying in a different dimension.

It spread its wings and stopped the moment it was right above Harutora, then its body disintegrated, crumbling like sand and becoming many feathers.

The black feathers danced, covering Harutora like an illusion. Natsume and the others could only watch helplessly from the side.

So before they realized it, Harutora was wearing an outer coat. An outer coat that both resembled a cape and a coat, seeming as if it were woven with raven feathers.

The coat of the legendary Onmyouji.

Tsuchimikado Yakou's clothing, the 'Raven's Coat'.

Dark light covered Harutora, and in the next moment, the lower hem of the Raven's Wing beat sharply as if were a wing. Kon, under the wind pressure, was dematerialized and vanished.

"...Harutora-kun!"

As Natsume screamed as if her heart had split, Harutora flew into the night sky.

Part 4

That oni had said.

"It can't be worn right now."

She hadn't know what that meant. Natsume had been very confused, but instinctively told herself that those words carried heavy truth.

"His life will be at stake."

His life will be at stake. Though the meaning was unclear, those words were clearly branded in Natsume's heart.

His life will be at stake. For some reason, Natsume trusted the truth of those words.

His life will be at stake. Natsume had some sort of premonition when she heard those extremely inauspicious words.

As if she heard the footsteps of her approaching fate.

◎

"It's a shikigami!"

Suzuka yelled.

She looked up at Harutora, who flew in the sky while wearing the Raven's Wing.

"The raven from just now is a shikigami! Probably a servant shikigami! That idiot was possessed!"

Suzuka's voice was filled with a panic that very quickly infected Natsume. "Hokuto!" She shouted, making the dragon pursue after the flying Harutora. Hokuto was also clueless, but quickly chased after Harutora who flew through the night sky.

On the other hand,

"How can that be!?"

Takiko, who had used the magic, also seemed to be dumbfounded at the unexpected reaction. But Kumomaru also stared at Harutora flying through the night sky with a stern look as well.

"Why? His aura's unstable and hasn't integrated? Damn, the Tsuchimikado also set up other measures?"

"...Why..."

...To think you can ask 'why'?

Natsume gritted her teeth.

Takiko's face was clearly as panicked as Suzuka's. Natsume's anger broke free of its restraints. What the hell was this girl thinking? Why did she toy with us so happily? What did she mean when she asked why? Stop screwing around!

But right now wasn't the time to get caught up in those things.

Natsume's black hair fluttered as she ran after Harutora. Touji seemed to shout out something, but she wasn't thinking of listening at all. She raised her head to stare upwards, sprinting with all her might.

Then, she thought of something.

"Yukikaze!"

She threw out the charm she often carried with her.

She summoned Yukikaze, the veteran shikigami that had served the Tsuchimikado family for generations. The handsome white horse looked divine. Natsume grabbed his reins, mounting the stirrups and sitting on Yukikaze's back with great momentum.

"Go!"

She shook the reins. Yukikaze suddenly leaped into the air, charging towards the sky.

The scenery from just before became distant behind her back as she drew farther and farther away from the ground. Natsume rode Yukikaze as it sprinted through the night sky.

The beautiful fireworks were still continuously exploding in the sky. Natsume shook the reins repeatedly, immersed in the light illuminating the night sky.

She could see the golden dragon in the distance reflecting the light of the fireworks. Natsume stared over there.

She saw it. A black wing that melded into the darkness, Harutora who wore a black coat. Suzuka had said it was a servant shikigami, and Takiko called it the Raven's Wing. Both were probably correct. The Raven's Wing - the one Ashiya Doman had once tried to steal - with the power to determine Yakou's reincarnation. The Raven's Wing wasn't Yakou's magical tool, it was Yakou's shikigami.

The Raven's Wing originally should have been in the hands of Natsume's father. That meant that it had been taken from Natsume's old home - as expected, the goal of that fire was the Raven's Wing - but why had the Onmyou Agency done so? What were they intending - no, come to think of it, why was it in Takiko's hands?

"Ah!"

Those things didn't matter.

"Harutora!"

Natsume shouted hoarsely, and Yukikaze sprinted through the sky.

Natsume's black hair and uniform billowed like flags beneath the pummeling of the strong wind. Yukikaze seemed to know it was an emergency situation and had been at its fastest speed from the start. They were finally about to catch up to Hokuto--

They caught up next to them.

Harutora wore the Raven's Wing. It pulsated like a living thing. Every time the long hem - the wing - flapped, black feathers dropped off releasing golden particles of light. It kept the shape of an outer coat, but it didn't seem like a coat at all, as if the black feathers were eating away at the body of the person wearing them. It was like Harutora had become a giant crow monster.

Rather than a shikigami, it was more like a Phase Three. A mobile spiritual disaster - without a complete form - before becoming a servant shikigami. Perhaps that was why it couldn't be controlled and had gone on a rampage.

"Harutora!"

Natsume immediately leaned over and shouted with all her strength.

Then,

"......Na......tsume....."

Harutora replied, buried in the black feathers. Harutora's eyes were indeed staring at Natsume.

Since his aura had overflowed before, Harutora's aura was already depleted. Now control of his body had been stolen away and he couldn't put up any effective resistance.

Suzuka said Harutora had been possessed. Examples of aura that used human bodies as cores had appeared before. Those were 'oni'. The Raven's Wing itself was already materialized, but its current state seemed extremely similar.

Harutora might have been engulfed by the Raven's Wing and become a spiritual disaster - a Type-Ogre. Moreover, Harutora had released most of his aura because of the Lingering Spirit Calling from before and his spiritual control had sharply fallen.

"Harutora-kun, get a grip on yourself!"

Natsume shouted. Harutora's face twisted as he responded to Natsume with all his power.

"This is very dangerous..... Don't..... come....."

With no regret.

Natsume shook the reins, forcefully controlling the cautious Yukikaze and trying to approach Harutora.

In that moment, Harutora rapidly spun around.

His straight trajectory turned at a sharp acute angle and he spiraled higher. A true raven couldn't possibly make such frightening, sharp movements. But during this rapid maneuver, the wings beating towards Natsume shot out many arrow-like black feathers.

"...!"

An attack from the Raven's Wing. She couldn't avoid it. Yukikaze rapidly reared up, using its own body to shield Natsume. Natsume's eyes widened and she knew she wasn't in time, but still reached for a protective charm.

But,

"Order!"

Suddenly, a blast of wind blew from her side. The black feathers the Raven's Wing had released in front of Natsume were scattered. Natsume endured the wind pressure, holding on to Yukikaze's reins with all her might.

She looked in the direction the voice had come from. Two eagles that seemed to have been folded from paper were flying towards her. Suzuka sat on the back of one, and on the other was Touji in his samurai state.

"Suzuka-san! Touji-kun!"

"Natsume, use Hokuto!"

Touji shouted a reply to Natsume. Natsume immediately followed his proposal. The Raven's Wing was still rising, but the altitude of Yukikaze's flight had limits. So she changed to having Hokuto soar into the sky and chase Harutora and the Raven's Wing.

The somewhat wary Hokuto gathered its strength, extending its giant body and soaring into the air, looping around to a position higher than the upward-spiraling Raven's Wing and pursuing the Raven's Wing from above.

The Raven's Wing swerved again. It glided down to the height where Natsume, Suzuka, and Touji were. Suzuka rapidly controlled her shikigami and Natsume coordinated with her movements, attacking the Raven's Wing from three directions - leaving the upward direction to Hokuto.

"Harutora, wake up!"

"What are you doing, you Bakatora!"

"Harutora-kun, get a grip!"

The three of them called out to Harutora one after another. They could feel that Harutora, buried in the black feathers, reacted to their voices.

But,

The Raven's Wing started spinning in place, spiraling while shooting out black arrows.

"Tch!"

Touji clicked his tongue. Suzuka, gritting her teeth, manipulated the shikigami carrying the two of them to avoid the attacks. Similarly, Natsume threw out a protective charm, erecting a barrier to defend against the arrows while still trying to get closer.

No good. Though the feathers the Raven's Wing released momentarily stopped upon hitting the magic wall, they pierced through afterwards.

"Ah!"

Not waiting for an instruction from its rider, Yukikaze suddenly descended rapidly. A rain of black arrows sliced right above Natsume as she lay on the horse's back. Though she didn't know how much power the Raven's Wing shikigami had, she definitely couldn't get careless. More importantly, their attacks might accidentally hurt Harutora.

Then,

"Bind! On bishibishi karakara shibari sowaka!"

Suzuka used the Unmoving Golden Chains magic. She and Natsume had reached the same conclusion.

Suzuka's magic bound the Raven's Wing and Harutora, but it was only for a moment. The bound Raven's Wing extended its wings and easily broke through Suzuka's magic in the next moment. Suzuka inadvertently stared wide-eyed at the fact that it had broken through so easily.

".....Damn! I heard that the Raven's Wing was originally an 'armor' that Yakou created! Simple magic probably won't work!"

Touji shouted from where he sat on his shikigami. Natsume had also heard that rumor. If Yakou had prepared this magical tool - this shikigami - to protect himself, then a high resistance to human magic was understandable. But in that case, stopping its actions while not harming Harutora became impossible, and they could do nothing.

...Think! Think!

Takiko had said that Harutora was Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation, and the Raven's Wing had indeed possessed Harutora's body, not Natsume's. Takiko's words were probably true. The reality before her proved what she had said.

But on the other hand, this situation had indeed betrayed Takiko's expectations. The Raven's Wing had unexpectedly gone out of control. That advice awoke in her again. The advice the one-armed oni had left printed in Natsume's heart.

... 'It can't be worn right now, his life will be at stake.'

That oni's advice was probably right. The current Harutora was undoubtedly in a condition where 'his life was at stake'. Also, that one-armed oni had said this too.

'What's up with that curse?'

'He became like this because it wasn't completely removed.'

She remembered it. That..... right, Ohtomo. Ohtomo had said this when he 'saw' Harutora.

'Seeing' Harutora's aura, he said:

... 'Your condition right now is extremely unnatural, and it kind of feels artificial.....'

Artificial - or, a 'curse'.

He had gone out of control because it wasn't completely removed.

...Then..... that meant.....

Many words crisscrossed through Natsume's mind, colliding with each other and sending sparks flying.

She was a decoy, a decoy prepared by Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi. She had been bound with magic since birth, she had been cursed since birth. Right. She had always had doubts. She always felt it was very strange. Why didn't Harutora have the spirit-seeing ability? Though he was in the branch family, he was a Tsuchimikado after all. The greatest, most prominent clan in Onmyoudou history that had raised hordes of Onmyouji. Why did someone with this blood not even have the most essential talent of an Onmyouji, spirit-seeing? More importantly, it was even less probable that Harutora didn't have the spirit-seeing ability if he was a main family member. Harutora's spiritual power was extremely strong, and he was spiritually robust and excellent. It was too unnatural to possess a very powerful strength for an Onmyouji yet lack the important spirit-seeing ability.

A curse.

He had been bound by magic since birth.

... '.....That magical pattern.....'

... 'Ah, ah, that star? That's from when I became Natsume's shikigami..... But it's not just a simple contract mark, it also lets me see spirits. It's a sign of the magic Natsume cast.'

The magic Natsume had cast.

The Tsuchimikado family secret magic her father had taught.

The magic Natsume couldn't completely understand either.

... 'He became like this because it wasn't completely removed.'

She had it backwards.

Natsume hadn't endowed Harutora with the spirit-seeing ability. No..... Harutora possessed an extremely outstanding spirit-seeing ability that he had been granted at birth. This point had been proven in the battle with Shaver. He had originally had that talent, but it had been sealed by his father. A curse. Harutora's spirit-seeing ability had been sealed by a curse cast at birth.

Natsume had released that seal.

That pentagram magical pattern. The one her father had taught her, that she deeply trusted - the magic granting spirit-seeing.

Harutora hadn't been granted spirit-seeing by Natsume--

Rather, Natsume had slightly released the seal cast on his body.

... 'This is probably the trigger. But it's not just because of this. In the end, you're practically a different person from before.'

No, it wasn't as if he had become a different person, he had returned to his normal self. The trigger Natsume had created - the crack in the seal binding him - had been forcibly broken open during the battle against Shaver. It hadn't been completely

removed. So he was currently being eaten away by the Raven's Wing and was unable to merge with or control it.

Then.

If she wanted to save Harutora - to help Harutora when his 'life was at stake', what should she do?

That magic.

The magic Natsume had cast on Harutora was the magic that removed the seal.

He became like this because it wasn't completely removed.

Then.....

"Harutora!"

Touji's shout made Natsume's consciousness return. She saw the Raven's Wing and paled. Harutora had lost consciousness again.

"Harutora-kun!"

Harutora forced his eyes open when he heard Natsume's cry, but his consciousness was still murky. In fact, it was already a miracle that he was still able to maintain his consciousness. Harutora's aura had already weakened to the point that it was hard to sense. A dangerous condition where he was at his limit. It didn't allow for a moment of hesitation.

... '.....It's great.'

... 'Eh?'

... 'The fireworks. It was great that we came here.'

Natsume pulled the reins tight.

She drove the shikigami on, dashing above the Raven's Wing. Hokuto seemed to not understand its master's intent and momentarily slowed its movements. Suzuka and Touji didn't know what Natsume was planning either and hesitated over what action to take.

Natsume wasn't concerned about the surrounding movements.

She just stared purely at Harutora.

She looked down from Yukikaze and bit her lip.

Her teeth broke the skin and blood flowed out.

As the blood slowly dripped down her lips, Natsume chanted a quiet incantation.

"...In the name of the ancestral spirit Abe no Seimei..."

She shook the reins powerfully and descended. The confused Yukikaze still obeyed its master's orders, approaching the Raven's Wing below. Of course, the Raven's Wing reacted to the approaching foreign object and spun in midair, confronting Yukikaze that drew towards it head-on.

"......Nat......sume....."

Harutora moaned. Compassion poured forth in Natsume's chest and she smiled fearlessly.

In the next moment, the Raven's Wing spread its wings, flapping them towards the airborne Yukikaze in the blink of an eye. Several black arrows shot into the sky.

Yukikaze naturally dodged, throwing its whole body to the side and cutting out a long arc.

Yukikaze suddenly stopped, because the weight on its back had unexpectedly vanished.

Touji, Suzuka, and even Harutora let out soundless screams.

Natsume, who had jumped off Yukikaze, didn't stop chanting her incantation as she heard her companions' cries.

Black arrows shot through Natsume.

Natsume's body spasmed intensely in midair - descending with the help of gravity.

She dropped onto Harutora.

Their bodies overlapped.

He couldn't understand the scene he was seeing. He just felt that it was laughable. Harutora, whose mind was already paralyzed, caught the slender body falling from above him.

...Eh?

As if synchronizing with the impact Harutora felt, the Raven's Wing stopped moving just then. Harutora and Natsume, tangled together, turned as they fell to the ground.

"......Natsume......!"

Harutora shouted as if spitting blood.

"......Haru......tora......kun"

Natsume moaned quietly.

As the two of them fell together, Natsume shakily raised her hands and put them on Harutora's cheeks. She weakly leaned her head in, closed her eyes, putting her lips and Harutora's together.

Natsume's magic flowed through Harutora's body. With the flowing magic coursing through his body, Harutora's eyes widened.

The curse was released.

Then, Harutora's aura was 'completely' released and the Raven's Wing also immediately reacted to his aura. Golden light ran through its black wings like electricity. Its organic form froze and became a black outer coat that covered Harutora's body. It naturally flapped downwards without any need for Harutora to instruct it, providing lift. Their falling speed decreased and the two of them floated in midair.

But that kind of thing didn't matter.

Harutora lost focus and stared at the battered body in his arms. Natsume also happily looked back at Harutora from her childhood friend's arms.

"......Natsume?"

"......Harutora-kun....."

Natsume's expression seemed dreamlike as she spoke through her blood-moistened lips.

"......I'm sorry..... for always hiding..... the thing about Hokuto..... But..... you probably..... already realized....."

His mind was blank. But Natsume's warmth that he felt in his arms slowly lifted Harutora's shock.

Bit by bit, warmness spread across his palms. The sensation of liquid dripping from his fingertips. The stains scattered on the black Onmyou Academy uniform widened more and more.

Harutora's heart throbbed and his pulse raced, his rationality beginning to slowly accept the truth that his emotions rejected. It shouldn't be this way. This couldn't be true. His rationality gradually suppressed his impulse to shout.

How frightening.

A bottomless terror began to assault Harutora.

This was the second time he had experienced this terror.

"Don't die."

"......Harutora....."

"Don't die!"

Natsume's expression seemed to be calling him unseemly as she watched Harutora's frightened cry. Then, she buried her face in Harutora's chest, entrusting her powerless body to him.

"Harutora-kun..... I... love you. .....I won't forgive you if you die....."

Natsume smiled.

Then, she closed her eyes in Harutora's arms.

Natsume's body went limp. A smile unconsciously showed itself on Harutora's face. "Natsume?" He spoke to her with a smile.

As if he had heard a joke.

As if he were being pranked.

Natsume didn't reply.

Natsume could no longer respond.

Natsume. Harutora continued calling out. Natsume, Natsume, he constantly repeated. But it wouldn't reach Natsume, and Natsume didn't respond to Harutora.

There was no response.

Touji and Suzuka also went speechless, frozen in place with pale faces. Hokuto had vanished at some point. Harutora didn't stop, constantly calling out.

Always and forever.

Yearning for an impossible response.

◎

Colorful fireworks exploded in the distant night sky.

Kakugyouki, who avoided people as much as possible as he approached, came to a halt after noticing the Raven's Wing stop its rampage.

".....Is it over?"

He focused his mind ahead of him. His presence was very weak because of the loss of strength from before. But he wasn't dead, he still lived. Moreover..... The remainder of the seal had been completely removed. His aura's nature had changed.

This aura was very familiar.

Kakugyouki inadvertently smiled.

The oni didn't make a sound as he calmly smiled.

He would just let things develop. But though he had said that, he hadn't thought things would truly develop like this. That seal had been a desperate gamble meant to conceal the young Yakou and trick the Onmyouji targeting him. But now the curse had been released and his former master had descended to the world again with no regard for his own desires.

He couldn't turn back anymore.

".....Then, how will things turn out?"

He muttered those words, but he had already confirmed something in his heart.

Tokyo's 'night' would become tumultuous in the future.

Just like during that war.

Kakugyouki smiled again. Saotome Suzu's surprised expression flashed through his mind. But there was no helping it. It seemed like the situation in front of him wouldn't allow him to stay out.

What a mess the personality of an oni was. Then, he would only be able to act guided by his own bad karma. He would no longer pay any heed to his past chains, nor would he be bound by the current situation. He would act freely.

"It'll be very interesting."

Kakugyouki bared his teeth in a cold smile.

Part 5

Someone's voice reached her. Ah, it was Harutora-kun. Harutora-kun's calling for me. Just that made me feel very happy.

Would he still come play? It had been very rare recently, so I felt a bit lonely..... Huh? No? It seemed like we were playing in a park not long ago.....

Ah, no, no. Harutora told me - he said to Hokuto. Come to think of it, today was the day of the fireworks festival. Will Harutora call me cute when he sees me in a yukata? That 'you're not cute at all' made me really mad when we met yesterday. I'll definitely make him call me cute in tonight's festival.

But what should I do? This pink ribbon. Harutora will definitely notice. Of course, that's why I wear it, but what will Harutora think? But, that's alright. There's no helping whatever happens. I'll tell it to him straight without hiding it anymore. I'll seriously, sincerely convey my feelings.

No, I'll have to study before then. Harutora-kun probably hasn't learned that stuff. Harutora-kun's already my shikigami, so I have to teach him properly to keep from shaming the Tsuchimikado family..... hehe. I wonder how long it's been since I taught Harutora. I was always playing with him, always very happy.

Ah, Harutora-kun's calling me. He's calling my name. I'm very happy that he's calling my name with all his power. Always, always.

Harutora-kun's calling me, Natsume, calling me. How relieving. My heart's so warm.

Suddenly--

That's great, Natsume thought.

She had seriously voiced her love. Before she realized it, Hokuto was also nodding. That's great, she smiled and said. Thanks. Natsume smiled back, becoming embarrassed.

Harutora was calling for her.

It was really great that she had seriously said it. It was truly great that she had conveyed her feelings of love.

Ah, but.....

It was still a bit scary but.....

I wanted to hear Harutora-kun's reply.